天地無用！魎皇鬼

家内安全編

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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

Peace and Safety in the Household

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Hazy Moon

Hey! It's Ryoko, the greatest former space pirate in the universe. This might be the first time I've talked like this.
See, I'm the type where a punch comes out before words do, and a kick before that, so I'm not really into going on and on about things after they've happened.
Well, I was told I absolutely had to, so I came out here to tell you this boring story.
What's so boring about it? Talking without a drink, that's what. Can't be helped since there are minors present.
Now, what was I going to say? Right—the shed. Why I smashed it up. Here's the thing…

That day the weather was somehow unsettled, and even at night the air was hazy and thick. On nights like this, you know it comes out. That thing.
What thing? Hold on, I'll get to it.
I went out for patrol like always. During the day I'm usually home, right? Well, not always, but that day I'd been indoors all day long facing that Ayeka character and I was fed up.
Even during patrol there's usually nothing happening, but that day maybe I was expecting something.
You know what a spring hazy moon is?
The kind that hangs in a dead-of-night haze when everyone's gone to sleep.
The cherry blossoms around the pond were blooming and thousands and thousands of them glowed dimly like faceless little monsters, and when you looked up at the misty black sky there too floated a huge faceless hazy moon.

I had chills.
The demonic energy was thick enough to make your hair crackle, and it felt like it was dripping down into the surface of the pond.
Something's coming, it'll definitely come.
Haven't felt my blood pumping like this in a while!
I suppressed my presence, settled onto a cherry branch, and waited quietly.
The moon slowly tilted westward.
The BGM was nothing but the faintest trace of a breeze.
Too early for insects to sing, and at this hour even the birds were all resting in their roosts.

My five senses were razor sharp, and my fingertips twitched seeking the scent of the supernatural.
About two hours passed just like that.
I was getting a little bored of waiting and starting to feel drowsy.
Not that I need a fixed number of hours of sleep like an Earthling or Juraian—it just means the tension had loosened with the tedium.
And then.
Beneath the cherry tree came the sound of a foot pressing into wet soil—msh.
Here it comes!
I instantly perked back up and sharpened my senses.
The footsteps went msh, msh, msh… walking under the cherry trees.
Fwsh—cherry blossoms scattered.
A long black arm swept the petals aside, and it slowly revealed itself.
Yes—a demon.
Not the cute kind from fairy tales—this was more of the kind that makes every hair stand on end. A real monster.
The demon gazed up at the hazy moon with glittering golden eyes.

Muscles rippled beneath skin like black iron.
Feet and hands bore sharp hooked claws.
Those claws had dried brown blood caked on them from the last time it had eaten.
The demon stood perfectly still, reading the air around it.
Or maybe it was following the scent of its prey.
And then, it grinned.
Curled-back lips revealed sharp fangs.
With a shake of its wild, unkempt hair, the demon started running.
I kicked off the branch without a second's delay and went after it.
Honestly, I was so pleased I nearly laughed out loud.
It ran straight toward the Masaki house.
That gave me a reason to fight.
Now, when it came to the front of the house, it sniffed the air with a look of pleasant anticipation, crouched for a moment, then leaped in one magnificent jump onto the second-floor roof.
Not a single roof tile so much as rattled.
When it wanted to, it could suppress its presence completely.
After all, it was a mononoke.
When the years cycle and dark energy accumulates, it appears from the deepest darkness, picks up the scent of humans, and devours them.
It had been doing that for at least seven hundred years.
I'd been sealed in a shrine for a very long time, only able to send out my consciousness, so I'd watched it with a thrill.
Really, it was quite a sight.
It ate the old and the young.
It ate monks and it ate warriors.
What I saw was from not even two hundred years ago.
I thought it was quite the cunning creature.
It had survived all this time without being exorcised, lurking in the darkness.

Well, in that way its situation was sort of like mine, except it could move freely, which made it far better off.
I was envious of the thing doing whatever it pleased, and furious, and once I was free, I thought I'd absolutely like to have it out with this creature.
Well, these days I'm free, so crushing it would be simple enough—but just killing it would be boring.
There was still time before morning, so I decided to play with it.

The demon pressed its face to the window of Tenchi's room and peered inside for a while, then passed by and stopped dead in front of Ayeka's room.
I was still suppressing my presence, positioned just about half a meter behind the demon.
The curtain was half open and you could see that Ayeka character sleeping inside.
The demon seemed to be shifting and twitching its back, sizing up its prey inside.
By now the only thing filling its head was the taste of meat—it couldn't see anything around it anymore.
Which will it choose?
I was excited.
Well, if I were it, I wouldn't eat Ayeka and would go straight to Tenchi instead, but this thing had no such concerns—it would want the softest, most tender meat.
Then, from behind the window the demon slipped silently inside.
It passed right through the window glass.
Just like my wall-phazing—it seemed to have a special ability.
The demon crouched over Ayeka and opened its maw wide.
Probably figured a child wasn't enough of a meal.
Now, there are limits to everything.
I had no intention of just watching quietly while it sank its teeth into Ayeka's throat, so I teleported and grabbed it by the back of the neck from behind.
"What do you think you're doing?"

That surprised it.
With enormous force it flung my hand off, raised its hooked claw, and tried to slam it into the side of my face.
If we had a brawl right here in the room it'd cause a huge commotion.
I instantly grabbed its arm, passed through the wall, and hurled the thing from the second-floor roof.
It landed in the garden with one full rotation, then glared up at me floating in the air with a terrifying face.
Golden light practically shot from both eyes.
With a low growl, it took a stance and bared its fangs.
Oh, now we're getting somewhere.
"Looking for a free meal? Sorry, but that's not how things work these days."
Before I'd finished speaking, it attacked.
The hooked claw grazed my cheek.
Honestly, this was my first time actually fighting it. I'd underestimated its abilities a little.
Its speed and strength were both exceptional.
I decided to touch down first and get my footing, so I jumped sideways.
We landed at the same moment.
I thought it kicked off the ground, and already a black-gleaming hooked claw was thrusting toward my eyeball.
That hand of its was big enough to crush a human head like an egg.
It was about twice my height, with ten times the muscle mass if I had to guess.
I ducked instinctively and drove my fist into its stomach.
No impact.
It had read my intent.
It dissolved like smoke and rematerialized behind me, trying to lock my arms.
This was worth fighting.
I reflexively somersaulted and landed a kick square in its face.

This time there was impact.
It bounded back and disappeared into the shadow of a tree.
Not bad for a mononoke.
Suppressing the urge to look around, I turned my back and began walking slowly toward the back of the house.
My back tingled.
It was furious right now.
Its meal had been interrupted, it had been toyed with, and now I was deliberately showing it my back even though it could clearly see me there.
One, two, three… I started counting my own steps.
Will it come at nine steps or ten?
That's what made it fun.
I was so caught up thinking about my pirate days that I nearly forgot the demon existed.
I used to enjoy chasing things down like this.
Pursuing the prey.
Being pursued by prey.
Honestly, back then it was far more life-or-death.
Dividing into the one chasing and the one being chased over a single treasure.
Running through the noses of hundreds of hounds.
One stumble and you'd instantly be someone's prey.
Kagato used to say it to me.
Ryoko, you worthless creature.
Why do you do such pointless things? There is no need to choose the dangerous path to achieve an objective. I gave you planet-destroying weapons-class abilities and the second-best ship in this universe. So you can reach your goal by the shortest route at the fastest speed.
Ha! As if.
Was I just some errand-runner?

Did he want me to charge through obstacles in some massive warship fortress?
Kagato and his pursuit of Jurai are gone from this universe now, but I always thought:
Fighting, hunting, treasure-seeking—it's only fun if your life's on the line.
That's why I became a pirate.
…I got sidetracked.
The point is, it didn't attack me.
The back garden was exactly twenty-two steps away.
On step twenty-three, just as I was about to reach the shed door, my blood ran cold.
It hadn't followed me!
It had gone to finish what it started…!

I teleported to Ayeka's room on instinct alone.
The room was empty.
The futon was carelessly turned back, still warm with body heat.
Was she taken?!
The shock of it made me feel like my insides had flipped upside down.
No time to dawdle.
I moved instantly to the living room, then shifted in quick succession through the kitchen and bathroom, checking each.
No sign of the demon. No sign of a person.
No good—she might already have been dragged into the shadows.
Not even time to scream?!
If you'd seen my face right then, you'd have thought the shrine demon was back.
That man-eating bastard!!
The blood that had frozen suddenly rushed the other way at full force.
I chased the demon's presence in a frenzy.
I'd underestimated it, been overconfident in my own read of the situation—that's what.
Then I heard the sound of a door opening upstairs.

I teleported on reflex.

"Sorry, Sis."

Sasami came out of the bathroom rubbing her eyes.

"Sasami got a little scared…"

"My, you really are hopeless."

That Ayeka was standing in front of the bathroom, leisurely yawning.

…She was safe!!

Even I felt my legs give out.

"Oh, Ryoko-san?"

She said.

"What are you doing out there?"

"You idiot!!"

I shouted at her. Felt bad about it, but I shouted.

"Get back to your room! And put up a barrier!"

Ayeka made a sharp face and said something like "how dare you," but by then I'd already moved outside so I don't know how it continued.

Out in the back garden, the hazy moon was even thicker.

Even the ordinary grass and weeds looked like they were giving off demonic energy.

"Where are you? Come out!!"

At that instant, a hooked claw dug into my foot.

The shock of it made my teleportation lag for just a moment.

Grabbing my foot, the demon launched itself off the ground and slammed me into the shed with full force.

That's it, I can't take anymore!!

In game terms—rage gauge at max, limit exceeded.

I charged at the demon driven by pure fury.

This time my speed was faster.

I slugged it full in the face, grabbed it by the hair and went for another—and then the thing slipped into the shadows and escaped.

Not getting away!

I chased immediately.

When I say shadow, I don't mean an ordinary shadow—from this side it's another world.

The world where supernatural things dwell.

Peel back the thin skin of a peaceful spring night, and that world spreads wide.

The moment I entered the shadow, my hands and feet tingled.

My nerves were reacting to the demonic energy around me.

The demon flew at full speed toward the pond, its black hair billowing in the wind.

The cherry blossoms in full bloom writhed like white faces melting together, stretching their branches, twisting and mocking me as I pursued.

"Wait!"

I shouted.

"If you think you can escape, you're dead wrong. You mocked me, now settle the score."

Then the demon turned in midair.

Against the swelling white hazy moon behind it, a black demon floated sharply defined.

Strange as it sounds, the sight made it look absolutely stunningly beautiful.

Deep down, maybe I was enjoying the situation.

"Why do you pursue me?"

It laughed as it asked.

When it laughed, sharp fangs peeked between its curling lips.

A cruel demon's face—one for which devouring humans was simply natural.

"Because you tried to eat her."

I answered.

"That woman is a bit of an acquaintance of mine, and I can't very well stay quiet while you eat her."

"A demon, protecting a person?"

It sneered.

"She had such delicious-looking white skin. I was going to devour the woman and the child in one go."

"I'm not a demon."

It probably wouldn't understand even if I explained, and I had no intention of explaining.

"Circumstances are what they are. I don't want the likes of you showing up regularly. Listen well. That place is my territory. Show your face there again, and I'll tear you to pieces!"

"Bold words for a lesser demon."

As expected, it understood nothing.

"Prey belongs to whoever finds it. The strong win in battle. You followed me into my realm—that makes you a fool."

"You say that, but really you're afraid of my power, aren't you?"

It showed no sign of backing down.

It probably thought it had cleverly lured me in.

Either way, I'd had enough talk.

"Let's go!"

I charged at the demon, trusting in my own fists.

One-on-one, it was a pretty good fight.

Both without weapons, a pure contest of strength.

Well, no matter how many words I use to describe what kind of fight it was, they won't do it justice—so I'll just say this much: it had misjudged the situation.

It thought it could lure me into its territory and beat me by brute force, but it got beat instead.

Even so, I tried to fight as fairly as I could.

Because if I went full power, I'd not only destroy the demon—I'd likely destroy the entire world along with it.

That's always how it is.

Measure the opponent's strength.

Bare hands against bare hands, sword against sword, use the same weapon.
If I don't strictly limit my own power like that, it just becomes bullying the weak.
I don't like that.
It might sound like I'm playing games when I say this.
And also—not that I'm making excuses—but when I release my full power, it's probably when I've decided I'm never coming back to Earth.
Because then I'd probably turn back into a demon.
The kind called a destroyer, the kind so terrible people hesitate to even speak of it, a heartless monster just born…
I pray that day never comes.
I really do.
Tch… this got depressing.
Anyway, just picture me beating that thing up with gusto.
It was unexpectedly strong and its expression changed.
"You laugh while fighting."
It said.
"What are you? Did you come from the sky? Is there a demon stronger than me?"
"Too bad."
I shot back.
"Is this all? Don't you have any more fight in you?"
Dawn was coming soon. At least let's play a little longer until then.
I suddenly felt wildly happy and let out an actual laugh.
The demon's hair bristled.
Is it coming?!
In that instant, the demon launched itself at me with everything it had.
Like a great black beast with enormous fangs and hooked claws.
Its fangs sliced through the air.
One more millimeter and it would have been the carotid artery for a human.
Both my shoulders were pinned to the ground by its hooked claws.

"Not bad! But this is it!"

Not fully restraining both hands was its mistake.

I grabbed its mouth and tore it wide open.

It let out a tremendous scream and leaped back.

Black blood dripped to the ground and sent up smoke.

"What are you… tell me your name."

"You can still speak?"

I slowly got up and looked down at its blood-soaked face.

"I'm Ryoko. Remember it well!"

It stared up at me with eyes that looked ready to breathe fire.

And then, the next moment, the demon's form disappeared in a rush of wind.

Cherry blossoms, stirred by the wind, formed a small whirlpool and spiraled round and round.

I suddenly felt all the tension drain out of me and stared blankly at the swirl for a while.

It wasn't until a while later that I realized I couldn't go home looking this beaten up.

When I came out to the back garden, dawn was already breaking.

The wounds on my shoulder had already started to close, so I went into the house just to get a change of clothes.

Now, you're probably wondering what happened—the shed was smashed up, I was nowhere to be found.

Truth is, I'd been sleeping in the shrine.

When I woke up, it was night.

I was ravenously hungry.

After making sure the wounds were no longer noticeable, I left the shrine to head home.

The sky, completely changed from the day before, was clear and bright, and the moon shone crystalline.

I wonder what happened to that thing…

I suddenly thought.
The wounds themselves would be healed by now, but it probably won't feel like coming out again for a while.
I hadn't intended to kill it, so that was fine.
I was hungry, but somehow the thought of going home and being asked a lot of questions felt tedious, so I walked slowly toward the pond.
Even I take a walk sometimes, you know.
It was a good night.
This might sound strange coming from me, but I love the moon.
Especially one all alone in the sky.
Three or four of them would be annoying, and having none at all would be lonely.
This is a good planet.
A planet I was shut up in against my will for seven hundred years, but someone once said, wherever you live becomes home.
If only there was some sake, it'd be perfect.
I nearly went back to get a bottle, but I held myself back and walked slowly down the path.
When I reached the side of the pond, I could feel a slight breeze.
The cherry blossoms in full bloom were scattering petal by petal.
When a petal fell to the surface of the pond, it drifted away in a breath of wind.
My chest tightened somehow and I stood there staring vacantly.
All the living things on this planet have such short lives… is what I suddenly thought.
Weird, right? None of my business.
And then.
All at once there was the rustling of a branch, and the demon appeared.
It was that thing.
This guy, showing up again without shame…!
I braced myself on reflex.
The demon grinned, then dropped from the branch.

The wounds from yesterday were gone without a trace.
And strangely, today it was properly dressed.
A kimono with a silver scale pattern and blue hakama—like a performer in a Noh play.
The demon fixed its glittering golden eyes on me steadily.
Then it turned slightly aside and began to sing, resonantly.
An ancient language song.
Don't ask me what song. I don't remember it at all.
The song flowed on leisurely, and eventually the demon began to dance.
A slow, mysterious dance.
Its feet certainly seemed to be treading the ground, yet not a single footfall was heard.
I just stood there with my mouth hanging open like an idiot.
A demon dancing… I may have been the first ever to see that sight.
In that moment, time itself was different just in that one place.
The demon and I had crossed time, flown to an era when it had lived more freely… that might have been true, or it might not.
I don't know.
There must be a long, long story there.
In its song and in its dance.
Then the demon suddenly stopped its feet, looked at my face once more, and grinned.
The next time the wind rose, it was already gone.
It wasn't until the moon had risen to mid-heaven that I remembered I ought to go home.
When I got home, everyone was getting ready for bed.
Ayeka was still up, and when she saw my face she came striding over.
"Ryoko-san, just where have you been? Are you aware there was a tremendous noise last night? The shed at the back…"
"Quiet!"

I felt bad but I shouted again.

"I'm hungry. Is there any sake?"

Tenchi was sighing and Ayeka was making a face like she was about to bite me—it was completely the wrong atmosphere for getting a meal.

I decided to just swipe a bottle and retreat.

When I got back to the pond, no one was there.

I'd expected that, but I was a little disappointed.

I wanted to see it again.

I wanted to see that mysterious song and dance again.

I wanted to see the demon's crystalline gleaming eyes glitter in tonight's moon.

I had no choice but to sit under the biggest cherry tree and start drinking.

No cup or anything—straight from the bottle.

After a while, the waves in my heart quieted down.

The wind had calmed, and in the surface of the pond where cherry petals had fallen, the shadow of the moon was reflected clearly.

Ahh, how beautiful…

That aimless line actually slipped out of my mouth.

And just then, I thought I saw the demon's dancing form.

It danced noiselessly across the water's surface.

And then it turned back and grinned.

A momentary illusion.

"Is that so…"

It had come to say goodbye.

Maybe in its own way it had come to pay me respect.

"I liked you."

I lifted the bottle and shook it a little in salutation.

The sake was down to a third.

I regretted leaving it, but I set the sake down where it was and stood up.

"See you, demon. Tonight I'll go home like a good girl."

Only then did I realize I hadn't even asked its name.
My regrets had grown to two, but there was nothing to be done.
I looked up at the scattering cherry blossoms and wished that the clouds wouldn't hide the moon, just tonight.
Because I felt like if the moon went dark, the memory of that mysterious dance would fade as well.
Fortunately, the moon shone crystalline, and on the ground below, the shadows of branches were cast clearly.
Well, everyone should be asleep by now. I'll head back.
Just then.
A large hand with black hooked claws reached out from behind the cherry tree—or so it seemed—grabbed the sake bottle and vanished in an instant.
A little while later I heard the laugh of the demon whose name I never learned, and it resounded in my ears and was gone.
That's the story of the shed.
Now, I've been talking so long my throat is dry—how about getting me some sake?
Ah, not the cup—the bottle.
All right, I'll be heading out.
Where to, you ask?
Flower-viewing. Cherry blossom viewing.
Night cherry blossoms.
You might just encounter it too, Tenchi.
A demon dancing under full cherry blossoms in the light of a hazy moon…

SUBJECT: How are you?

Hey Amagasaki, how's it going?
Sorry I couldn't see you the other day.
What have you been up to lately?
Over here it's the same as always, but last night apparently there was some kind of commotion.
I was asleep so I had no idea.
I mean, Ryoko… it sounds like she fought some kind of monster.
I Went out to the garden in the morning and the shed was smashed up, tree branches broken all over the place… you'd understand what I mean.
She says she was exterminating a demon.
A demon… this isn't Momotaro (lol).
Anyway, putting that aside.
Lately I feel like I'm turning into an old man.
Like, a primary industry worker.
Living in relationship with the soil.
Is this really what I should be doing? Kind of feeling that.
It's actually pretty busy in its own way (well, everyone helps out with various things), but what am I, exactly?
You say I'm happy, you're jealous of me, but living with girls is actually pretty tough.
Even when nothing's happening you have to be considerate, and when something does happen you have to follow up.
Sometimes I honestly want to go back to being an ordinary high schooler.
Sometimes I want to just watch girls from a distance.

I'd probably get called spoiled for saying this so I'll stop, but right now I can't see any future at all.
Can't even imagine myself ending up with someone here, or choosing someone.
But I also can't imagine myself falling for some other girl.
When I think about just drifting along like this, it sometimes gets to be too much.
I want to do something—but I don't know what.
I want to try and see what I'm capable of—but as long as I'm here I just end up in the field anyway.
You'd think I should go back to school, right?
But it's not like that.
Going back won't make things the same as before, and I think I'd just be even more on edge.
I should be enjoying myself more when I'm happy right now, I know.
I think that too. Usually I'm okay.
Sasami-chan is cute, Ayeka-san is cute, Ryoko is cute, Washu-san is a little hard to figure out but she's amazing. Ahhh… I guess this is fine too (lol).
But it's not like I can marry all of them at once (lol).
Will we just live as this big family forever?
Or maybe I should go out to Osaka or Tokyo and live on my own (lol).
By the way, about that anime you mentioned the other day—maybe I'll go see it.
That thing that's been getting so much buzz lately.
You said it's incredible, right?
I'll go see that film and try to think some things over.
Take care.
- Tenchi

Fresh Greenery

"Okay, I'll be off then."

A fragrant early-summer weekend.

A refreshing morning with dazzling fresh greenery.

But the face Tenchi turned back toward them as he stood in the entrance with his Boston bag was far from the clear brightness of May.

"…Are you really sure? I won't be back until tomorrow night. Father isn't here either, and neither is Washu-san. Just the two of you, really…"

"There's no need to worry so much. I'll be perfectly fine."

Ayeka smiled.

"It's only one day. I'm not a child. I'll be waiting as always for everyone to come home."

"Sis, maybe Sasami should… stay home after all?"

Sasami, with a backpack on, murmured with a worried look.

I want to go with Tenchi-nii-chan… it was written all over her face.

"It's written on your face, Sasami."

Ayeka gave her sister a sideways mild glare.

"Now now, what are you worried about? An opportunity like this doesn't come often, so enjoy it and take your time. Tenchi-sama, please look after Sasami, won't you?"

"Yes."

Tenchi smiled apologetically.

"His place is small. I can't very well have Ayeka-san sleeping on the floor in a man's room too. I do feel bad about Sasami-chan."

"It's fine because Sasami's small!"

She turned sunny in an instant—still a child, after all.

"He's Tenchi-nii-chan's friend, and I'm the one who said I wanted to go."

"Mind your manners."
Ayeka suddenly turned sisterly and began issuing detailed instructions.
"Listen carefully to what Tenchi-sama says, and don't trouble his friend. Don't zone out or you'll get lost. Don't ask for too many things. Don't eat nothing but sweets. Brush your teeth properly before bed and don't stay up late, go to sleep early. And also…"

"Sis, enough already!"
Sasami puffed out her cheeks.
"I know all that without being told. But Sis, are you going to be okay? George-san isn't here either, so someone has to cook. There's Ryo-chan's meal too—it'll be hard."
"Yes, yes, I know."
Ayeka answered with an unruffled air.
"Go on now. Tenchi-sama, you'll be home for dinner tomorrow evening, won't you?"
"Yeah, probably."
Tenchi turned back again and again as he left through the entrance.
"Sorry to impose, but I'll leave the house in your hands."
"Do take care."
Ayeka watched until Tenchi's somewhat sullen face and Sasami's delighted one disappeared from view, then sighed once and went inside.
"Phew…"
A second sigh.
The usually noisy living room was perfectly quiet, and only the sound of the clock struck her ears strangely loud.
"Until tomorrow night, there won't be anyone here."
With the exception of one certain person and one certain creature.
Ayeka forcibly pushed the certain person out of her mind.
"Elder Brother said he was busy with temple business and couldn't come…"

Masaki Shrine's Katsuhito apparently had some consultation with a parishioner's household, and he'd be away from morning until evening both today and tomorrow.
"Haah…"
Ayeka sighed a third time.
"Whatever shall I do?"
Ayeka leaned against the sofa and gazed at the penetratingly vivid greenery outside.

Now, the reason Ayeka had been entrusted with the house-sitting this time was as follows.
A friend of Tenchi's who had moved to Kyoto suddenly called three days ago.
Sasami overheard the invitation to come stay over the weekend and launched a sustained "that sounds great~" campaign, and the surrender of both elder sister and Tenchi was given the day before yesterday.
Father Nobuyuki headed out saying "I've got a business trip, but you'll be okay, right?" the day before.
The same day, Washu and George said "Contact us on the Ansible if anything happens," and left for an academic conference at the Galaxy Academy, and this morning Tenchi and Sasami had set out.
"It's fine. House-sitting… I've never done it before, but it's just one day, I'll manage somehow. If a certain someone will just behave."
Ayeka muttered, looking up at the empty rafters loud enough to be heard.
She was about at her limit of patience.
"Ryoko-san! I know you're there. Come out this instant!"
At that moment, a twitching tail accessory appeared on the rafter.
"Ugh, so loud. I've got nothing to do with this, so leave me alone."
Ryoko was stretched out at full length on the rafter, and she was in a bad mood.
"Cheapskate. You could have taken me along too…"
"Stop being such a child. Given how things are, we must properly hold down the fort."
"You can hold it down on your own."

Ryoko dropped lightly onto the carpet.

"I'm telling you now—I never said a single word about house-sitting. You handle the meals and laundry. I'm not doing a thing until Tenchi comes back."

"Why, you—!"

The two women glared at each other.

Already on the brink of explosion.

"Very well."

Ayeka was the first to lower her weapon.

"You needn't do a thing. As long as you behave yourself, I'll handle everything else perfectly. Now then—I wonder which of us will be laughing when Tenchi-sama returns?"

"Ugh…"

Ryoko ground her teeth.

"Fine, I get it! I'll do whatever needs doing. Where do we start? Cleaning? Laundry?"

"Now now, there's plenty of time."

Ayeka inwardly allowed herself a small smirk.

"Why don't you start by polishing the glass. After all, it's the season for fresh greenery outside—won't it be lovely once they're sparkling clean?"

"…Fine, window cleaning."

Putting her rage gauge on temporary pause, Ryoko disappeared into the storage room and came back with a bucket and rag rolled up her sleeves.

"Where do I start?"

"The spot directly in front of where Tenchi-sama sits—right here."

Ayeka pointed sharply at the glass sliding door of the living room.

"Now if you'll excuse me…"

Ayeka clasped her hands behind her back and began making a graceful circuit of the house.

"I didn't get to the washing-up this morning because it was so busy. There's a bit of laundry too. Whose turn was it to clean the bathroom… it's such fine weather, I should hang out Tenchi-sama's futon to air it…"

"Hey, Ayeka!"

Ryoko's shouting voice came from outside.

"What on earth are you doing in there? You'd better not be slacking off wandering around inside!"

"I am considering how to organize the housework."

She answered in a cool voice.

"Where is Ryo-Ohki? Please make sure she doesn't come in with muddy paws."

Just then, the front doorbell rang. Ding-dong.

"Coming."

Standing at the entrance was a saleswoman wearing heavy makeup and a brand-name-looking suit, smiling broadly.

"You're the lady of the house, aren't you?"

"Ah, yes…"

The perfect timing made her nod involuntarily.

"My, how young and beautiful. I thought you must be the daughter!"

The saleswoman placed a large business bag firmly in the entrance.

"My name is Mukano from Daisy Lingerie. Have you happened to see our shapewear that's been in the spotlight in magazines and on television?"

"Hm?"

"You need only take a look. You're so young and beautiful, ma'am, and surely wear charming undergarments—but our products are for beautiful ladies like yourself, precisely."

Talking like a waterfall, the saleswoman produced one item after another.

Brassières, girdles, body suits—all of them clearly expensive.

"Ah, um… I don't really…"

She couldn't quite bring herself to say she'd never worn such things.

"Yes, yes, of course, please just feel these. This brassière's cutting has been refined through our company's unique research to magnificently lift the bust. Just putting it on makes a completely different silhouette. Wearing garments like this from a young age gently trains the body to an ideal proportioned shape without any strain, maintaining your best figure at all times. Would it be all right if I came in?"

"Hm…?"

About an hour later, Ayeka had come to "receive" a French lace shapewear brassière that lifts and pushes an A-cup up to a C-cup, a high-waist long girdle that raises the height of the hips by five centimeters without flattening their roundness, and two each of a body suit that shapes the entire figure to ideal proportions.

"Here is your invoice. Please transfer the remaining amount to this account within one week."

"Y-yes…"

By the time she came to her senses, the saleswoman was gone, and Ayeka stood blankly in the entrance holding a pile of shapewear, her purse, and Nobuyuki's bankbook.

"I can't believe I…"

Only a single thousand-yen note was left in the purse.

Flushing red, Ayeka gathered up the undergarments and hurried up the stairs with quick steps.

Meanwhile, as for Ryoko:

"Tch… I can't be bothered with this!"

She was lying spread-eagled on the roof, leaving behind a glass door striped even more thoroughly than before from being wiped too hard with a dirty rag.

"Wait—I'm pretty sure there's a self-propelled window-cleaning mechanism in Washu's lab…"

Ryoko sat up with a start and teleported directly to the entrance.

Ayeka was nowhere to be seen.

"Then I'll just pop in to look for something…"

Around the time Ryoko's figure disappeared into Washu's lab, Ayeka stood before the mirror in the second-floor room, heart pounding as she studied her reflection.
The Super Lift-Up Brassière and High-Waist Long Girdle were certainly worth a second look, high price and all.
"You're the lady of the house, aren't you," she said.
Ayeka's cheeks flushed.
"Earth women really wear such constricting things… but it is certainly effective."
Lifted by the brassière, Ayeka's chest swelled in exquisite curves, and a clear valley had formed at the center of her bust.
Ayeka hurriedly opened the dresser and pulled out a T-shirt Mihoshi had left behind.
Under the wide-necked T-shirt, Ayeka's bust stood up proudly in a conical shape, and she looked like a completely different person.
"Unbelievable… I can actually wear a shirt like this."
But she had nothing to wear on the bottom.
Ayeka gave up and changed back into her kimono, then looked at the mirror again.
Her chest and waist somehow appeared higher.
"Should I just keep wearing it… but Tenchi-sama isn't even here, and wearing such undergarments when there's no one around…"
There Ayeka became aware of her own unconscious thoughts and turned tomato-red, gathering up all the remaining garments and throwing them into the dresser, then closing the drawer with a pounding heart.
"The money… Elder Brother will surely manage somehow."
She hadn't even spoken to him about it yet and her heart was already racing.
Murmuring inwardly—one hundred thirty thousand one hundred and fifty yen (tax included)—Ayeka wearily descended to the lower floor.
Enormous slugs were crawling slowly across the glass windows, leaving iridescent slimy trails.
"Oh My, Ryoko-san…!"
"Hey, Ayeka."

Ryoko, stretched out on the sofa watching "Good Morning Everyone," turned around.

"By evening that slime will turn into a transparent coating that'll make the windows and house sparkle. Smart, right?"

"That's not the point!"

Ayeka couldn't help leaning on the sofa.

"What would people think if something like this was crawling all over the house? Tenchi-sama would scream if he saw!"

"Isn't it you who wants to scream?"

Ryoko smirked.

"What's the problem? Less hassle. By the way, I'm hungry."

"You're hungry already?!"

The moment she said it, she realized she was hungry too.

Come to think of it, she'd been so preoccupied with Tenchi in the morning that she hadn't eaten anything.

"Ryoko-san, your hands are free right now, aren't they?"

"Yours are too."

Ryoko was blunt.

"…I'll take care of the dishes afterward."

Reluctantly, Ayeka conceded a hundred steps.

"Nope," said Ryoko. "We can order takeout."

"We don't have any money."

Ayeka took fifty more steps with heartbreak.

"Why don't we have money? I saw Tenchi's dad leave thirty thousand yen."

Knowing nothing, Ryoko pressed mercilessly.

"There were certain circumstances…"

She couldn't back down any further.

"Fine, never mind! I'll go without lunch."

"All right then, I'll put some water on to boil."

Ryoko stood up and gave an ostentatious stretch.

"I'll put this one on your tab, Princess."

Ryoko went to the kitchen, filled the kettle with water, and dropped in a single tablet.

"What is that?"

"A pill that boils water in five seconds."

Ryoko started counting down.

"5, 4, 3, 2, 1, zero!"

BOOOOOM!!

Jetting steam like a rocket from the bottom, the kettle shot through the ceiling and roof and disappeared into the stratosphere.

"…Seems like it worked a little too well."

"I'll return the favor as-is."

Ayeka sighed and began boiling water in a pot.

Somehow the situation kept getting worse and worse.

Ryoko and Ayeka silently slurped instant ramen, watching the enormous slugs disappear from the window frame.

"Mya…"

A modest sound came from under the living room table.

"Oh, Ryo-Ohki. What, are you hungry?"

"Myamyaa…"

Ryo-Ohki, somewhat low-energy since Sasami wasn't there, rose up on Ryoko's knees and made a modest gesture of will.

"Want some cup ramen?"

"Myamyan."

Ryo-Ohki shook her head.

"Then go to the storehouse and get your own carrot. Oh—it's starting."

"I'm sorry, Ryo-Ohki-chan. I'll come by later."

Seeing that the eyes of both women were now glued to the TV, Ryo-Ohki tilted her head.

"Mya~"

She gave up and trotted off toward the entrance.

Thirty minutes later, Ayeka was gripping her handkerchief with tears in her eyes, while Ryoko had her arms folded and a pained scowl on her face.

"This is terrible! That woman was just living honestly according to her feelings…"

"Look—sorry to say this, but I think that woman is just running headlong into her own unhappiness."

The drama featured a heroine who had fallen in love with a married man, and the harder she struggled the more miserable she became.

"Getting drunk, getting into a car accident, ending up in hospital? Get a grip."

"It's all that man's fault!"

Ayeka fixed Ryoko with a sharp look.

"Playing with two women's feelings! Tenchi-sama would never do something like that. Even if it is adultery, two people who love each other coming together is only natural…"

Ayeka suddenly stopped speaking.

"That's not something I can say. Adultery is absolutely out of the question. If anything, he should just take both as wives and they could all live together happily!"

"That's a contradiction from what you just said."

Ryoko smirked.

"Is that how all Juraian royal family people think? Then there's no problem with me getting together with Tenchi."

"There is a very large problem with you!"

Ayeka went red.

"In any case, Tenchi-sama hasn't said anything yet. We don't even know who he'll choose—how brazen of you."

"You don't need to say it in words—there's such a thing as wordless understanding."

Ryoko stood up, proudly displaying her impressive figure.

"In the end it's not words that matter."

"My goodness…!"

Ayeka was speechless.

"I shall return to my room. Being around you is unpleasant."

"Go right ahead."

Ryoko answered coolly.

"I think I'll just pop over to Kyoto and pay Tenchi a…"

"You'll do no such thing!"

Ayeka hurriedly grabbed Ryoko's sleeve.

"I will not let go no matter what! I won't allow you to trouble Tenchi-sama!"

"Joking."

Ryoko leaned in until their noses nearly touched, making Ayeka flustered.

"My, my? Didn't your chest get a little bigger?"

Ryoko peered down at Ayeka's chest as if trying to look inside her collar.

"It has not!"

Ayeka let go of Ryoko's sleeve, pulled her collar tightly closed, and trotted toward the entrance at a half-run.

"I'm going to check on the field, so please tidy up the table!"

"What a weird woman."

Ryoko flopped onto the sofa and began leafing through a magazine Nobuyuki had left behind.

"Ahh, it's boring without someone to tease."

If only she didn't have that princess air about her, she's not that bad a person… Ryoko stuck out her tongue at Ayeka in her mind.

The constant "Tenchi-sama, Tenchi-sama" is just so annoying, that's all.

Ryoko suddenly recalled Tenchi's slightly troubled face.

"Sasami-chan's lucky. She's a kid. She can cling to Tenchi-nii-chan and no one says a word."

Picturing Sasami's smile as she cheerfully handled housework without a single complaint, Ryoko felt a genuine prick of conscience.

"…Maybe I'll do the laundry at least."

She teleported to the bathroom in an instant.

She opened the lid of the washing machine, threw in the dirty clothes, dumped in all the remaining detergent, and pressed buttons at random.

Then, all at once, Ryoko's face lit up as if she'd thought of something.

"I'm all alone!"

Teleporting to Tenchi's room on the second floor, Ryoko dove onto his bed and pressed her face into the pillow, closing her eyes.

"It smells like Tenchi…"

She lay there hugging the pillow blissfully, then gradually burrowed under the covers.

"…Tenchi."

Ryoko curled up like a cat, wrapped in Tenchi's scent, and fell fast asleep in absolute happiness.

Ayeka and Ryo-Ohki returned from the carrot field as evening was approaching.

Ryo-Ohki, seeing there was no carrot stock in the storehouse, had gone straight to the field and dug and nibbled to her heart's content, then curled up on the remaining leaves and fallen asleep.

Ayeka couldn't bring herself to be angry, and sighed as she began cleaning up the ravaged field.

By the time she realized it, the sun was already sinking to the mountaintops, and Ayeka's body ached in every joint from the unfamiliar labor. (Perhaps the constricting shapewear contributed a little.)

"Ryoko-san?"

She raised her voice at the entrance but no one came out.

"She's bound to be napping somewhere."

Ayeka muttered crossly as she went to the bathroom to wash her hands—and was struck speechless.

The washing machine lid was open, still producing foam in great quantities, and the floor was flooded.

"Oh no, this is terrible!!"

In a panic, Ayeka pressed buttons at random, finally realized, and yanked out the plug.

"Ryoko-san!"

Ayeka searched the whole house on sopping feet, dashed up the stairs, and flung open the door to Tenchi's room.

The bed was mounded in exactly one person's worth of rounded shape.

"I knew it!"

Pulling back the covers revealed Ryoko glaring up at Ayeka with the most aggrieved expression.

"…What is it. I was just at the good part."

"This is no time for that! You—the washing machine. Just what did you do to it?"

"Washing machine?"

Ryoko tilted her head, then clapped her hands.

"Oh right, there was that. Forgot to hang things up to dry."

"That's not it! Come with me."

By the time they'd cleaned up the washing machine mess, rewashed everything, and cleaned themselves up as well, dinner time had long since passed.

"Sorry, my bad. I'll make dinner, so you just sit there."

A momentary terrible premonition flashed across Ayeka's back as she sat in front of the TV, but she was too tired to stand up and object.

"I'll take you up on that."

Ryoko hummed to herself and checked the rice cooker. Fortunately, plenty of rice remained.

Sasami had been considerate enough to cook extra.

"All right, I just need a side dish."

Ryoko checked the refrigerator and pulled out preserved seaweed and pickles.

She should have stopped right there.

"If I chop up some vegetables and meat and throw them in a pot…"

Despite using decent ingredients and decent seasonings, the finished dish was an unspeakably ominous dark brown substance that could be called neither stew nor soup.

Ryoko, unfamiliar with the concept of tasting as you cook—or with cooking at all—had randomly chopped vegetables with their skins still on, along with some sausages from the stores, dried horse mackerel, and fish cake, thrown it all in the pot, emptied out all the seasonings in the vicinity, and then added mysterious supplements she'd found in Washu's lab.

"Done, Ayeka."

"Oh, is this stew, Ryoko-san?"

The moment Ayeka elegantly spooned up a mouthful, her color changed and she ran to the bathroom.

"What's wrong? I'll go ahead and eat."

Ryoko slurped up a full bowl of the stew(?), then a moment later dropped her soup bowl and ran to the kitchen to drink directly from the tap.

"…What is this?!"

When she returned to the living room, white smoke was rising from the cushion where the stew had spilled.

Ryoko shuddered and put a lid on the stew pot, placed it in an empty flower pot, covered it with the smoking cushion, and banished it from her field of vision.

"Just what was that?!"

By the time a pale-faced Ayeka came back, the pot had completely vanished.

"…Let's forget it."

The two women ate rice with pickled daikon and preserved seaweed, then utterly collapsed onto the sofa, too tired to move.

"Hey, Ayeka. House-sitting is exhausting."

"…Yes."

That was the end of the conversation.

They realized they'd fallen asleep with the TV on and the lights all on when it was almost time for dawn.

Ayeka, who had turned off the TV, noticed an eerie sound coming from outside.

Crunch-crunch-crunch-crunch… a sound like something being ground up was coming from all around the house.

"Ryoko-san! Wake up!"

Ayeka shook the sleeping Ryoko and pleaded desperately.

"What? What is it now?"

"Can't you hear it? That sound…"

"Just ignore it."

The sound was certainly there, but Ryoko couldn't work up the will to lift a finger.

Left in anxiety and dread until morning, Ayeka finally steeled herself and opened the curtain to find out what the sound was.

"Kyaaaaa!!"

The garden had been stripped bare.

Enormous slugs had swarmed all the trees and plants, stripped the leaves voraciously, and when that wasn't enough, had even eaten the small patches of moss on the ground.

The crunching sound had been the sound of slugs eating leaves.

"The fresh greenery… all those young leaves…"

There was also a different problem, but that aside.

"…This is bad."

Even Ryoko was somewhat taken aback.

The slugs seemed, if anything, bigger than yesterday.

(Using that random one probably wasn't a good idea…)

"Hey, Ayeka! Flamethrower!"

"There's no such thing here!"

Ayeka looked ready to faint. (She appeared that way but was actually standing firmly on both feet.)

"Can't be helped. The garden's stripped bare anyway, might as well pour gasoline and…"

"Absolutely not!!"

Ayeka's face went rigid.

"Even you don't want to touch them, do you, Ryoko-san? Then some kind of poison—that's it!!"

Ayeka dashed into the kitchen.

"Ryoko-san, what about that stew from yesterday?"

"You—going after something someone took the trouble to cook?!"

"Well it wasn't edible!"

Ayeka stood her ground.

"Bring it out right now!"

The stew was sitting safe inside the flower pot.

Was it just her imagination, or did the pot look considerably corroded?

"Spread it out there! I'll do it myself!"

Ayeka grabbed the pot and ladle, dashed into the garden, and scattered the cooled stew like a seed-scattering old man.

In an instant, the enormous slugs turned purple, fell from the trees one after another, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

"This is it! This is the one!"

Ayeka applied herself to pest extermination with furious eyes, and before long not a single slug remained in the garden.

"Terrible…"

The garden, spattered with stew, had changed color and was putting up white smoke like a volcanic crater.

"Such a beautiful garden… what on earth shall I say to Tenchi-sama…"

Ayeka burst into tears.

"Um… well, that was my fault."

Ryoko sat down firmly on the sofa with arms folded and began wracking her brain about what to do.

This was indeed bad. A state of emergency.

"It'd take half a day to clean up… and it still wouldn't go back to the way it was."

"What happened, Ryoko-chan?"

Heaven's help or divine providence.

"My goodness… it looks like winter."

Washu had come through the subspace corridor to pick up something she'd forgotten, and nearly composed a haiku at the sight of the devastated garden.

"Ryoko! You took my precious Mitchi-chan out!"

"…Just for a little window washing…"

Even Ryoko was on the defensive now.

"That's a biological material for planetary development. Without control it'll eat all the plants on an entire planet!"

"Never mind that. Please fix it before Tenchi-sama comes home…"

Ayeka clung to Washu's sleeve in tears.

"Washu-san, I'm so sorry to ask right after you've just returned, but please, your power…"

"Ryoko, Lady Ayeka—this is going to cost you."

Washu decided to skip the conference.

The fortunate things were that Washu had collected plant samples from the garden, and that it was still early morning—so by the time Tenchi and Sasami returned late that evening, the garden was almost completely back to normal.

Setting up a special field for forced cultivation, using nutrient agents, soil conditioners, and neutralizers, and borrowing plants from the mountain behind the house and from the ornamental garden, everyone working all together—it had taken a full fifteen hours to accomplish.

"You must be tired coming back so late."

George, who until moments before had been gardening in work clothes and a twisted headband, asked Tenchi with a perfectly straight face.

"No, I'm fine. But thank you for holding the fort."

Knowing nothing, Tenchi smiled at Ryoko and Ayeka.

"I brought yatsuhashi from Kyoto. Shall we have some tea?"

"How kind, thank you."

Ayeka smiled back with dark circles under her eyes.

"Sasami-chan, did you have fun?"

"So much fun."

Watching the sleepy, yawning Sasami, Ayeka murmured with heartfelt feeling.

"Back to normal starting tomorrow."

"I'm going for a little walk."

Ryoko disappeared with a look that said she couldn't bear to stay, and George and Washu quietly exchanged glances.

"By tomorrow morning the fresh leaves will be even more beautiful."

"Yes."

Tenchi thought Washu's smirk was peculiar but said nothing.

The next morning, the glass windows shone with rainbow colors, and the garden's trees and plants sparkled with new greenery as if just born.

"It's like they were transplanted."

Tenchi murmured, and went out to the field where not a single carrot remained.

SUBJECT: I Do Beg Your Pardon for the Other Day

Dean, I hope you have been keeping well since we last met.
I have been quietly troubled ever since hearing at the conference that your health was not good.
I hope you are feeling better now.

Now, I must sincerely apologize for stepping away from the conference on urgent business the other day.
I would like to request that the public experiment I was scheduled to conduct be postponed to the next occasion.
As you are aware, in my present circumstances I am residing in a private home on the third planet of the solar system, Earth, and am consequently often caught up in unexpected situations.
A supplement to the ongoing research, [The Power of Jurai and Its Properties], will be sent at a later date.
Please also give my regards to all the conference members.

-Washu
(This letter was written on behalf of my Master by her unworthy secretary and assistant, George.)

P.S. So, sorry about that, Dean. I'll be sending Washu-chan's special medicine by separate post, so give it a try. It should clear things up within twelve hours.
Washu

P.S. Who was that stiff-looking professor in the black robe sitting at the opposite end of the table? Everyone around him seemed to be giving him a wide berth.

May Darkness

"Rain, rain, every single day…"

Sasami gazed at the low rainy-season sky and gave a small sigh.

"Hey, Sis. Why does it rain so much?"

"You already know the answer to that."

Ayeka had spread jigsaw puzzle pieces all over the Japanese-style room floor and was peering carefully, comparing the reference picture to the pieces.

"Because it's the rainy season. Without this rain, Tenchi-sama's field carrots and the garden flowers couldn't grow."

"On Jurai it only takes once a week."

Sasami stood up and gazed at the rain-soaked trees in the garden.

"Tenchi-nii-chan's away too, so boring…"

Tenchi was out today, delivering something to Nobuyuki's office.

"Washu-chan and George-san look busy, and Ryoko-nee-chan went somewhere, and Ryo-Ohki-chan is sleeping."

"Oh my, what's the matter?"

Ayeka laughed and paused her hands.

"It's unusual for you to complain like that, Sasami."

"I'm just bored."

Sasami puffed up and blew onto the window glass, then began drawing with her finger.

"Want to do the jigsaw puzzle with Sis? Or what about studying? You've been slacking lately, haven't you?"

"Juraian studying is boring."

Sasami erased the picture she'd just drawn with her palm and wiped her wet hand on the curtain.

"Your teacher will be sad if you slack off too much."

Ayeka returned her eyes to the puzzle.

"He went to all the trouble of making a learning program and sending it, so you have to do it every day."

"I hate studying staring at a screen."

Sasami pouted completely and jumped onto the sofa back, knocking a cushion off.

When she was in the Juraian royal palace, Sasami had several private tutors and received advanced education, but since settling at the Masaki house, a learning program had started being sent via Ansible communication.

Distance learning, so to speak.

"…Hey, Sis. Sasami wants to go to school."

"School?"

Ayeka looked up, surprised.

"You mean the Juraian Royal Academy?"

"No, a school on this planet."

Sasami stared out at the direction of the gate as if trying to see through the falling rain.

"If you keep going down the road, cross the bridge, and go even further, there's a school, right? You know—the elementary school Tenchi-nii-chan said he went to when he was little."

"Elementary school?"

Ayeka was confused.

"What is an elementary school? Is it something like the initial course at the royal Academy?"

"You see, it's a place where lots of children gather and everyone studies and plays together. They have excursions and sports days!"

"Then it's like the initial course. A place where children of the royal family and royal guards learn discipline and knowledge. It's rather unusual for royals to go to such a place, but shall I speak to Father? But Sasami, you'd have to go back to Jurai to attend the Academy."

"That's not what I mean!"

Sasami slid off the sofa.

"Sasami wants to go to an elementary school! The one Tenchi-nii-chan went to, whatever it's called. Then I'd make lots of friends, and on days like today I'd have someone to play with."

"My goodness…"

Ayeka was speechless.

"You are a princess of the Juraian royal family. Going to a school for Earth people… Father would absolutely not allow it."

"Why? Sasami is a child. Children all go to school—Tenchi-nii-chan said so! Sasami wants to go to school too. I want friends…"

"Sasami…"

Ayeka was at a loss.

"I don't know much about Earth schools. First I'd need to consult Father, and if he says it's all right then I'd need to consult Uncle Nobuyuki or Elder Brother Yosho…"

"Never mind."

Sasami looked down sadly.

"Father is sure to say no. Nobody understands Sasami's feelings at all."

Sasami slumped her shoulders and started to leave the room.

"Sasami, where are you going?"

"To the shops. Ryoko-nee-chan chugged all the milk this morning and there's none left."

For a moment Ayeka half-rose, thinking she'd go along.

But if both of them went out, the house would be empty.

She hesitated for a brief moment, and heard the sound of the sliding front door opening.

"I'm off then."

"Be careful."

Ayeka hurried to the glass door.

Through the rain, Sasami could be seen trudging along with a red umbrella.

"…Poor thing."

Sasami, who almost never complained, making such a sad face.

Maybe I should consult Elder Brother Yosho without telling Father.

He might say it's fine to let her go if she wants to go to school…

Ayeka sighed softly and returned to the Japanese room where the puzzle was spread out.

"What a gloomy day."

Ayeka noticed and turned on the Japanese room light, then sat back down.

The room brightened but her mood was as overcast as the rainy-season sky.

"If only Tenchi-sama would come home soon…"

A vague unease flitted through a corner of her mind.

I think that if Tenchi-sama is nearby then I'm happy—but what about Sasami?

If we are to live here permanently, would it be better for her to attend school and work like an ordinary Earth person?

Like Kiyone-san and Mihoshi-san.

When Sasami goes shopping, she uses Uncle Nobuyuki's money as a matter of course, but really shouldn't I as her elder sister be providing it?

Born into the service of many retainers and attendants, only just now beginning to imitate the motions of daily life, Ayeka couldn't think beyond that.

If I were to marry Tenchi-sama and live in this house… if we were to have children and want to raise them here.

Would we send the children to school like ordinary people, cook meals and wait for my husband to come home?
This imagination far exceeded Ayeka's capacity for grasping reality and made her heart pound.
Ayeka cupped her cheeks in both hands, left the puzzle as it was, stood up, and rushed back to the window.
"I too must learn many things about this society… I can't remain a guest forever…"
Sasami is so much further along than I am, Ayeka thought.
Sasami could surely leap over any barriers in one bound and melt into this society as if she'd been born an Earth person from the start.
"I must think about the school for her."
Ayeka murmured, and looked back at the rainy-season sky that seemed to have grown even darker.

Sasami was walking alone down the slope, heading toward the general store a little way ahead.
"I want to go to school…"
Then the sound of bright laughter and splashing water could be heard, and Sasami looked across the road.
Two girls much bigger than Sasami were on their way home from school, bouncing red school backpacks on their backs and talking about a quiz show Sasami also knew well.
Sasami stopped involuntarily and watched the two backpacks pass with envy.
"Nice… they look like they're having fun…"
Sasami wants friends too!
For a brief moment, the hand gripping the umbrella handle shook with the strength of her feeling.
It was closer to a wish than a thought.
The girls paid no attention to Sasami in her ordinary jumper and skirt and walked on.
Sasami gave a small sigh and began trudging again.

"What should I do…"

The truth was that going to buy milk had been a lie.

It was true that Ryoko had chugged her share, but there were still two packs of milk they'd bought in bulk left in the refrigerator.

She'd just had to get out of there—she couldn't stand it anymore.

"That's it. I'll go to the school!"

It'll be almost evening soon, and if I go now maybe I can sneak a peek without being questioned.

Sasami gripped her umbrella tight and broke into a run.

So absorbed was she in the idea of secretly visiting the school that Sasami didn't notice a girl with a bob haircut watching her intently from behind an electric pole.

It felt like she'd run a long way.

The elementary school past the bridge was less than a kilometer away, but Sasami was pressing her hand on the school gate, breathing from her shoulders for a while.

"I made it…"

She peered timidly through the gate.

Those older girls must have had some special reason to stay—there was no sign of anyone at the entrance, and the rain-soaked schoolyard was empty too.

"What are you doing?"

Someone's hand tapped Sasami's back.

"Kyah!"

She spun around in surprise, and there stood a pretty girl with a bob haircut.

Moist black eyes and translucently white cheeks.

About the same height as Sasami, wearing a red school backpack.

"Ah—wow, I was surprised! Are you from this school?"

"Yes."

The girl smiled.

She was wearing a white sweater with navy stripes even though it was already June.

"I'm Chikako. Sawara Chikako. What about you?"

"Um… Masaki Sasami."

Sasami suddenly noticed the girl was standing there without an umbrella.

"You'll get wet. Come under my umbrella."

"Thanks."

Chikako willingly came under the umbrella and smiled again.

"Came to look at the school?"

"Yes."

Sasami's heart pounded at having her inner thoughts hit exactly.

"I came to look too. Let's go together!"

Chikako pushed Sasami's back and smoothly went up through the entrance.

"Leave your umbrella there, and wear my indoor shoes."

Where Chikako pointed were white indoor shoes with 3-2, Sawara Chikako written on them.

Sasami hesitantly put her umbrella in the umbrella stand and, as told, took out the indoor shoes and changed into them.

Due to the rain, the indoor shoes were damp and left a cold sensation on her feet.

"Where do you want to see? I'll show you around!"

"S-sure."

Is this really okay?!

Sasami cautiously followed Chikako into the school building.

"This is the second-grade classroom. All the pictures and writing are so bad, right?"

"Hmm…"

Sasami looked curiously at the paintings and hiragana-written goals plastered all over the walls.

"The fourth-graders' classroom is above, but want to go to the first-graders'?"

"Yes."

"This way then. It's the south building."

Chikako passed the entrance and suddenly stopped just before the stairs.

"The teachers' room is to the left. There might still be teachers there, so be very quiet."

Chikako lowered her voice and squeezed Sasami's hand firmly.

A cold sensation.

Sasami nearly pulled her hand back on reflex, but felt that would be rude and held firm.

"Quickly!"

Chikako crept up the stairs on tiptoe and slipped into a classroom on the second floor.

"I miss it—the first-grade classroom."

Chikako ran to the window and looked down at the schoolyard, now quite dark.

"Hey, Sasami-chan. Why don't you go to school?"

"Hm?"

Sasami was surprised and stared hard at Chikako's face.

"But you said it. 'I want to go to school.' I heard you."

"What?"

On the way to the shops!

Sasami remembered.

That's strange… I thought there was nobody around.

"And you thought 'I want a friend,' didn't you?"

"Um… yes."

Sasami tilted her head.

Strange! How does she know all this?

"I was thinking the exact same thing right then—I wish someone would come."

"Where were you? Sasami had no idea."

Sasami couldn't help asking back.

"Behind the electric pole."

Chikako smiled.

"You pass by there sometimes, don't you?"

Sasami felt a chill.

Something is odd… she seems like a completely ordinary girl, and yet.

Sasami felt uneasy and looked out the window.

Rain fell without pause from the low sky, making puddles in the schoolyard.

"It's getting dark—Sasami really has to go home."

Chikako then slid silently close to Sasami and gazed into her eyes with those moist black ones.

"Already going home? And I was just about to tell you the school's secret."

"But…"

And then Chikako suddenly made a prim face and turned her back.

"If you're going, give back the indoor shoes."

Sasami was in trouble.

"If it's just a little longer…"

"Really?"

Chikako turned around with a delighted expression.

"Then I'll tell you! This way!"

Chikako went running down the stairs with light pattering steps.

"Wait!"

Sasami hurried after her.

The connecting corridor between the south and north buildings seemed a little darker than before.

Running close behind Chikako, Sasami caught a glimpse of something gleaming on the right-side wall and glanced toward it.

"Oh—a big mirror."

She was about to pass it and gasped.

Chikako, who should have been right in front of her, was not reflected in it.

It had been only a momentary glance, so maybe she'd seen wrong.

Either way, there was no time to check.

Chikako had slipped smoothly into the classroom at the end of the corridor.

"Science room?"

Sasami put her hand on the door.

"Hm?"

It was locked.

"Chikako-chan, it won't open."

Chikako came flying and opened the door.

"Sorry, sorry. Come in."

Right beside the door was a glass-fronted cabinet containing a skeleton, a half-peeled human figure, and glass bottles, and Sasami was startled.

"What's all this? So creepy~"

"Sasami-chan, don't you know?"

Chikako's eyes went wide.

"This one is the skeletal model. This one is the human anatomy model. And this…"

Chikako suddenly lowered her voice.

"At midnight it moves. It opens the glass on its own and comes out. It walks all through the school."

"Whoa?!"

Sasami involuntarily backed away.

"It's really true! I've seen it myself. And the heart of the anatomy model goes beat-beat."

"No way…"

Sasami felt unsettled and glanced outside.

Though it was getting dark, the car pickup area was still somewhat light, and several cars were parked there.

"Hey, hey. Sasami really has to go home now."

Just then.

"Hey! What are you doing in there?!"

A shout came from the direction of the door and Sasami jumped.

"School hours ended long ago. Hm? Hmm?"

A teacher in a tracksuit was trying hard to open the door.

"Uh oh, we've been found!"

Chikako squeezed Sasami's hand and touched her own forehead to Sasami's.

Sasami involuntarily closed her eyes.

"Wha—?!"

Class 5-1's teacher Enokido nearly lost control of his legs.

The two girls inside the locked science room had vanished like smoke.

One was a third-grade-looking girl with a bob and a school backpack, and the other was a girl with twin pigtails whose face he didn't recognize.

"G… ghosts…?!"

The teacher backed away and ran at full speed toward the teachers' room.

"Oh, that gave me a scare!"

Chikako patted her chest in relief and smiled at Sasami, whose eyes were wide.

"We're safe here. We're far from the science room."

"Where is this?"

Sasami looked around at the black-gleaming piano and shelves of various instruments.

"I know! Is it the music room?"

"Correct!"

Chikako walked with dancing steps to the piano, opened the lid, and began playing a random tune.

"Hey, Sasami-chan, you didn't seem very surprised."

"About what?"

The moment she asked, it hit her.

"We just teleported from the science room to here!"

"Exactly right!"

Chikako sent a probing glance from behind the piano.

"I see. So Chikako-chan has psychic powers too. Sasami thought maybe only Ryoko-nee-chan could…"

Sasami nearly bit her tongue.

"Hehe… it's nothing."

She covered with an embarrassed laugh.

Terrible if I started talking about having a former space pirate sister at home.

"You're a little different from ordinary children, Sasami-chan."

Chikako didn't press further.

"Chikako-chan is too."

Sasami felt relieved and smiled.

Chikako stood smoothly and took a tambourine from the shelf.

"One little bird, in the great big sky…"

Chikako began singing, jingling the tambourine bells sharan-sharan.

A song Sasami had never heard.

"Isn't it a nice song? We used to sing it every Wednesday at morning assembly. I loved it."

Chikako's gaze softened and wandered through the air.

"Mai-chan and I used to sing it together a lot. On the way home from school. That day, Mai-chan had a cold and was absent, and I thought I had to hurry and bring her the handouts…"

Chikako suddenly stopped speaking and tossed the tambourine onto the shelf.

The bells went sharan, and for a moment the music room was filled with a red light.

At the instant Sasami blinked, the red light like evening sun disappeared, and the sound of rain returned.

"Hey—will you be my friend?"

Chikako turned those black eyes straight on Sasami.

"I'm lonely. Everyone forgets so quickly."

Forgets what? What do they forget?

Who is Mai-chan?

Chikako's white face floated in the twilight.

Sasami's spine tingled and she could neither answer nor ask questions.

"Right? I'll teach you the song from before. And I'll tell you more of the school's secrets too."

"Chikako-chan…"

Suddenly Sasami realized.

This girl is no longer living.

No longer living, yet her soul had returned.

"You thought you wanted friends, didn't you? I wanted friends too. Every day I watched from behind the electric pole. But even when I come to school, nobody plays with me."

Chikako glided smoothly toward Sasami.

"Sasami-chan, let's play together. You can stay at school forever. You can study too, and if you go to the kitchen you can watch them making curry in this enormous pot. So, play with me…"

Chikako's white hand landed on Sasami's shoulder, and then suddenly an incredible force yanked her arm.

"Come. Please."

"No… Noooo!"

Sasami desperately tried to shake off the cold hand.

"No! You have to come with me."

Chikako's feet slowly lifted from the floor.

Sasami grabbed a shelf board on instinct and planted her feet.

If this hand lets go, if my feet let go, Sasami will have nothing to hold her and will be taken to the spirit world!

"Let go! This isn't what friends do!"

Chikako's white face twisted in sadness for a moment.

"I'm sorry. Sorry, Sasami-chan. But I'm lonely. I don't want to be all alone anymore."

And then Chikako's borrowed white indoor shoes left the floor along with Sasami's feet.

"No—Tenchi-nii-chan, help me…"

Just then.

"Chika-chan!!"

With a piercing cry, a bigger girl came bursting into the classroom.

"Chika-chan, stop!"

At the same time, the cold hand released her, and Sasami fell to the floor.

"Mai-chan…"

_____

Chikako floated in the air like a marionette.

Her body became stained with blood before their eyes, and mud and blood spread across the white sweater.

"You…"

Behind the older girl called Mai-chan stood the male teacher who had startled Sasami in the science room.

"Why did you come? You'd forgotten about me, and now you've come to get in my way?"

Chikako's voice seemed to resound from deep within the May darkness.

"No—I came to get something I forgot. And then teacher Enokido said he'd seen Chika-chan…"

"Sawara Chikako?"

The teacher's face was ashen and his voice was trembling.

"Mai-chan…"

Chikako glided through the air and touched Mai's long hair with her fingers.

"Your hair got long. I've been waiting forever. I've wanted to talk so much. Why didn't you call me?"

"Chika-chan, it's not like that."

Tears streamed from Mai's eyes.

"I was in so much pain, so sad—I pretended not to see. I didn't want to believe Chika-chan had died. Because it was because of me…"

Chikako's black eyes wavered. The next moment, white hands entwined in Mai's hair.

"Then come. Stay here forever. Don't graduate—stay with me!"

Chikako's slender fingers grabbed Mai's hair and pulled until it seemed it would come out.

"It hurts! Chika-chan, it hurts."

"I wanted to become a fourth-grader together. I wanted to become fifth-graders together and join the badminton club. I wanted to become sixth-graders together and go to camp…"

"I'm sorry, Chika-chan, I'm so sorry…"

Mai pressed her head with her hands, desperately trying to avert her eyes from the blood-soaked face.

"Let her go!"

At an unexpected voice, Chikako's hand loosened.

"If you do that, she'll hate you! And I'll hate you too. Is that okay?!"

"Sasami-chan?"

The childish face, still that of a third-grader, looked between the two in confusion. At sixth-grade Mai, who had grown so much, and at Sasami, who had come to school for the first time today.

"Sasami will come to school. And I'll be Chikako-chan's friend. So don't force anyone to come with you!"

Chikako's feet landed on the floor with a quiet thud.

"Really?"

"The big sister will be sad to see Chikako-chan making such a frightening face too. So go back to the face you had before. You smiled at Sasami, didn't you."

Chikako's black eyes wavered back and forth between the two as if she couldn't believe it.

"Really…?"

The bloodstained color faded away, and Chikako returned to the form Sasami had first seen.

"Will you really be my friend?"

"Yes."

Sasami smiled.

"But I won't go to the ghost world. Sis and Tenchi-nii-chan would worry."

"Chika-chan."

Mai ran over without thinking.

"I never forgot, not a single day. I really wanted to see Chika-chan. But thinking about it made me so sad—I forced myself not to think. Please understand!"

"…Yes."

Chikako looked sadly up at the grown, mature face of the friend she'd once been closest to.

She had grown so tall that Chikako had to look up to see her now.

"I'm sorry, Mai-chan. Did it hurt?"

Chikako's form wavered.

"Call me, okay? Even after you graduate, come sometimes."

Chikako smiled.

The innocent smile from three years ago when the two had been the best of friends in this world.

"Goodbye, Mai-chan."

The white face faded into the twilight, and only the sound of rain remained in the dark music room.

"Chika-chan?"

When she came to herself, Sasami was standing in her socked bare feet on the parquet floor.

"She's gone…"

Teacher Enokido shook his face as if released from sleep paralysis, and finally seemed to notice Sasami.

"You're a kid I don't recognize. Where's your house?"

"Um…"

Just then, Mai's hand slipped around Sasami's shoulder.

"Teacher. I think she's from Masaki Shrine. I've seen her before. Right?"

"Yes."

Sasami felt somehow relieved, and thought warmly—Mai's hand is warm.

"Then I'll walk you home. It's dark already, and it's raining too."

"Yes."

Teacher Enokido locked the music room and turned on the hall lights.

All the way to the entrance, Mai kept holding Sasami's hand.

"Oh! Tenchi-nii-chan! Sis!"

The moment she reached the entrance, Sasami was so eager she started running even before she'd put her shoes on.

"I knew it'd be here. What have you been doing until so late?"

"Sasami!"

Ayeka made an angry face and ran to Sasami, pulling her into a hug.

"Sis was worried half to death! The shop said Sasami hadn't come, and I didn't know where the elementary school was."

"I'm sorry, Sis."

Sasami suddenly felt embarrassed and quietly glanced back toward the entrance.

"You're the teacher, aren't you? I'm sorry to trouble you."

Tenchi bowed politely, though he didn't know the teacher.

"You're her big brother? I didn't know this child's face either."

Teacher Enokido smiled with relief.

"Not going to school right now?"

"There are some circumstances…"

Tenchi was vague.

"Hmm…"

Teacher Enokido noticed Sasami's anxious face and smiled.

"Come to school soon. I'm the teacher for Class 5-1, my name is Enokido. I'll be waiting."

"I'm sixth-grader Aizaki Mai. Hey—is this red umbrella yours, Sasami-chan?"

"Oh!"

Sasami made an "I forgot" face and dashed over.

"Thank you, big sis."

"Sure."

As Mai handed over the umbrella, she quickly whispered in Sasami's ear.

"Hey—were you singing 'One little bird'…?"

"Yes."

Sasami remembered Chikako's clear voice.

"I'll teach it to you next time."

"Okay!"

Mai and Sasami exchanged a secret glance.

On the way home, Sasami walked pressed close to Ayeka's side, silent.

"Sis. Sasami definitely still wants to go to school."

"Keep it secret from Father."

Ayeka smiled and nodded.

"You've already made friends."

"Yes. Three of them."

One little bird… in the great big sky…

Sasami thought she wanted to know how it continued.

(By the time the rainy season clears, the two of us will surely be able to sing it together.)

Sasami smiled softly back at Chikako's moist black eyes.

SUBJECT: Dear Elder Brother

When I try to talk face to face, my thoughts tend not to come together well, so I've decided to write to you in this form.
You're probably thinking—if I'm going to write a letter, why not just come see you right away?
But if I speak to Elder Brother, it seems you'll come to a conclusion immediately, and that frightens me.
I am wavering now.
Though saying that, you probably have no idea what I mean.
The truth is… it's about Sasami.

It was about three days ago now—there was an incident where Sasami went alone to the elementary school that Tenchi-sama used to attend.
I suppose Elder Brother has heard about it?
On the way home, when Sasami said she wanted to go to school, I found myself thinking—perhaps that would be all right.
The next day, Sasami looked at my face and asked: "Sis, when can Sasami go to school?"
I know nothing about Earth elementary schools.
I was giving vague answers, when Sasami looked back at me for a moment with an earnest, desperate expression.
"Sis is waiting, okay. Sis understands Sasami's feelings, doesn't she."
That is what she said.
My heart ached.
At the same time, I felt ashamed of my own vague answers.

For Sasami, still so small, how painful it must be to wait.
She wants to go to school right away, she wants friends.
I'm sure that's what she feels inside.
But she was considerate of me, her sister.
She also understands that going to school is not something that can be done so simply.
It is her one and only little wish as a sweet younger sister.
I genuinely want to grant it right away—that is my honest feeling as an elder sister.
Sasami, who without a word of complaint every day cooks meals, does laundry, and works for everyone in the Masaki household… she is at an age when she should be playing without a care alongside friends her own age.
Please don't tell me to do it myself instead.
I'm not skilled enough at cooking to take over from Sasami from tomorrow.

But even if Sasami enrolled in school, would she get along well with Earth's children?
Might she be bullied for being a different kind of child?
And what if Sasami changes?
What if she learns all sorts of new things and starts using bad words?
The knowledge that there will be time when she is not by my side—time when I don't know what she's doing—feels, right now, terribly unsettling.
What if she gets hurt? What if she gets sick?
What if there's an accident on the way to or from school?!
You'd say, there's nothing to worry about, wouldn't you, Elder Brother.
Sasami is clever and dependable, and my worries may well be no more than groundless fears.
But…

You don't know until you try, do you?
Right now I am earnestly telling myself exactly that.
Please, please lend me your wisdom and your strength.

After all… this has turned into another muddled letter.

I'm sorry,

-Ayeka

Tanabata Night

"We're finally done. Kyo-chan, you've worked hard!"

"Get changed quickly! The cream puffs Sasami-chan likes will sell out."

Mihoshi and Kiyone finished their shift at convenience store Three Stars, exchanged farewells at top speed, and walked briskly out of the store.

"Take it easy. Say hi to Ryoko-san."

Sato Satoru, who had taken on the look of the store's successor, waved.

"Monster house, he called it!"

Mihoshi burst out laughing.

"Close enough! Come on, let's go!"

Tomorrow was their day off from work.

Which meant Mihokiyo would be going to stay at the Masaki house to use the hot spring.

"Going through the park is shorter."

"Aww, wait for me, Kiyone!"

Just as they were about to cut through the small park near the shopping district.

"Spica? You're Spica, aren't you?"

Someone suddenly spoke to her, and Mihoshi turned around in surprise to find a short young man in a buttoned shirt and jeans.

He wasn't particularly handsome, but he had a serious-looking face.

He looked a little old to be a university student.

"Ah… I'm sorry."

The young man shrank his slender frame apologetically.

"Your back looked just like a friend of mine."

A sad color floated into the young man's eyes.

"I'm sorry. By any chance—do you know anyone called Spica? You probably don't."

"Let's go, Mihoshi."

Kiyone gently nudged her elbow.

"If we don't hurry, the cake shop…"

"Yes."

Mihoshi hesitated.

Something was telling her to stop here.

"Sorry. Can you go ahead? I'll catch up."

Kiyone looked worried but said nothing and walked on.

"I'm Mihoshi. Did I really look that much like her?"

"Ah, I'm… Sugaya Toshiyuki."

The young man answered hurriedly.

"Her golden hair caught my eye, and I thought it was Spica…"

"Spica?"

The young man's eyes clouded.

"I've been waiting for seven years. Every time Tanabata comes, in this park… I have to see her."

He looked up suddenly.

"I'm sorry. To a complete stranger…"

"We've already met now."

Mihoshi felt that something in the young man's expression had softly pressed a switch.

"I'm sorry for not being of help."

"No, I'm the one who…"

Spica… Spica…?

Even after leaving the park and the young man behind, Mihoshi felt strangely stirred.

"…And now for tomorrow's weather in the Chugoku region. Okayama Prefecture—tomorrow's weather will be cloudy with occasional rain, precipitation probability from noon to six p.m. is forty percent…"

"Rain again?"

Tenchi, watching the weather forecast, murmured.

"Hey Sasami-chan, we put up those decorations, but the stars might not be visible tomorrow night."

"Nooo~!"

Sasami ran to the glass door and looked up at the bamboo branch swaying at the eaves.

The bamboo Tenchi had cut from the mountain behind the house was festively decorated with strips of paper and colored paper cut into ornamental shapes, awaiting the main event tomorrow.

"What happened, Sasami-chan?"

A flushed Mihoshi came into the living room fresh from the bath.

"Whether tomorrow's Tanabata will be okay."

Tenchi glanced at Mihoshi in her tank top and short pants and looked slightly embarrassed.

Under the short tank top, without a bra, her well-formed bust was clearly visible.

"How was the bath?"

"Ahhhh… Masaki house's floating hot spring really is the best."

Kiyone answered instead, her washed hair neatly combed, wearing a nine-hundred-eighty-yen T-shirt and Bermuda shorts—one step removed from cool.

"Tenchi-san, thank you for having us."

"So formal, all of a sudden. You come to use it all the time."

Tenchi laughed.

"Well, true."

Kiyone laughed back.

"I've become thoroughly dyed in Earth's customs, I suppose. Greetings are the lubricant of life. Working at the convenience store and considering all sorts of customers, I really feel I've settled into this planet."

"Then participate in one more event on this planet. Ryoko and the others are still writing wishes on strips of paper in the Japanese room."
Tenchi waved his hand toward the Japanese room.
"Strips of paper? Oh right—writing wishes. Tenchi-san, what did you write?"
Kiyone looked up at the Tanabata bamboo.

I'm going to marry Tenchi!! Ryoko

A strip written in thick black marker was the first thing that caught the eye.

I'll definitely marry him!! Ryoko

An additional strip hung next to it. "Definitely" had a double line through it.

I won't give him to anyone!! Ryoko

The one next to that was also Ryoko's handwriting.

Especially not to any Juraian royal family woman!! Ryoko

"Yes yes, message received loud and clear."
Kiyone murmured involuntarily.
At this rate, no number of strips would be enough.
Sure enough, on the opposite branch hung just as many strips in Ayeka's elegant brushwork.

May I be able to marry Tenchi-sama. Ayeka

Next to that was another additional strip.

May I be certain to marry him. Ayeka

"Certainly" had a wave underline.

May Tenchi-sama make the right choice. Ayeka

This seemed infused with sheer determination.

There is no way I will hand him over to a space pirate! Ayeka

By this point it had long surpassed the category of a wish.
"Haah…"
Kiyone sighed.
Rather than a wish list, this was a battle formation across the Milky Way, on the brink of explosion.
"What about everyone else?"

May Sasami be able to go to Disneyland with Tenchi-nii-chan. Sasami

Set up an office in Hawaii! Nobuyuki

I want to see a great-grandchild soon. Katsuhito

"That's dangerous again…"
Kiyone's cheek twitched slightly.
The wit involved in hanging a strip like this under the battle of wishes between Ayeka and Ryoko—truly Katsuhito was no ordinary person.
"Tenchi-san's isn't here."

Looking over the bamboo packed with strips, this one caught her eye:

Washu-chan is a genius! Number one in the universe!! Washu

Hidden behind it, hanging as if to conceal itself, was another strip.

May everyone get along and live in peace. Tenchi

The reserved heir of the household, right to the end.
"So like Tenchi-san…"
As Kiyone gazed fondly at Tenchi's careful handwriting, Sasami came running over.
"Kiyone-san, can you tie this?"
She was holding a cute little lucky-weather doll.
"To make sure it doesn't rain tomorrow. The Weaver Star and the Cowherd Star—if it rains they can't meet each other, can they?"
"You know all about it, Sasami-chan. Who taught you?"
"Tenchi-nii-chan."
Kiyone tied the lucky-weather doll on a high branch so it could be seen well.
"Is it really true they can only meet once a year?"
"So the legend goes."
Kiyone answered with Tenchi's own answer.
"But isn't something like that wonderful? If someone like that would appear for me too…"
"Write something like that on a strip."
Mihoshi came over to hang her strip right away.
"Oh, you already wrote yours? Fast. What did you write?"
"S-E-C-R-E-T ♡"
Mihoshi hid the strip behind her back with embarrassment.
"You~"

Kiyone burst out laughing.
"What secret? You're about to hang it up."
She snatched the strip away.

I'd also like to maybe marry Tenchi-san if possible… ♡ But I feel bad for Ayeka-san and Ryoko-san… I guess never mind. Mihoshi ☆

"What is this?!"
Kiyone laughed.
"Mihoshi, if you're going to make a wish, you could be a little bolder. This way it looks like you've given up from the start."
"But you know…"
Mihoshi's cheeks flushed, and even so she tied her strip right next to Tenchi's.
"It's fine. Because I really felt that way. Never mind that—Kyo-chan, hurry up and write yours."
"Hmm…"
I don't have any wishes…
"Come on, Kiyone-san, go ahead. I'll go make some tea."
Ayeka rose quickly and left the room.
"Done already? Let's do more, Ayeka."
Ryoko looked up at Ayeka with a smirk.
"I won't fall for that trick."
Ayeka turned her nose up and walked back-straight out of the Japanese room.
"These days you two get along so well."
Kiyone stole a glance at Tenchi, absorbed in the TV across the room.
"Why not just both go to Jurai and marry him there? But then Mihoshi would be in a sad situation."
"Just playing around."
Ryoko answered breezily.

"Nobody knows the future anyway—as long as today is fun, that's enough. Well, she's serious about it though."

"Ryoko-san?"

Seeing an unexpected side of Ryoko, Kiyone paused for a moment.

"Meeting only once a year isn't so bad. Then love would last forever."

"Ryoko-san, you…"

"What? Ugh, so boring."

Ryoko stretched broadly, stood up, and walked away, leaving Kiyone behind.

"A wish… what is my wish?"

Kiyone stared at the blank white strip, lost in unusual thought.

That night.

Mihoshi, who normally fell asleep within five minutes of getting into bed, was lying unusually with her chin in her hand, staring blankly.

"What's wrong?"

Kiyone, exhausted from work and barely able to keep her eyes open, called out.

"Hmm…"

Mihoshi flung back her summer blanket, went to the cleared corner table and began writing something.

Then she took a strip and slipped quietly out of the room, and the sound of the sliding door opening was heard.

"Something forgotten?"

When Mihoshi returned, Kiyone spoke to her, and Mihoshi smiled shyly.

"Yes, just something."

Mihoshi slipped into her futon and rested her chin on her hand again.

"Hey, Kiyone. Did you write a strip?"

"No."

Kiyone lay face down and rested her chin on her folded arms.

"Somehow… I wasn't sure what to write."

"What? You didn't write 'May I meet a wonderful person'?"

"Because…"

Now Kiyone averted her eyes shyly.

"Everyone was writing about Tenchi-san, weren't they? I felt a little… I'm not quite there, and writing something else seemed out of place… I think Tenchi-san is a good person."

"You don't have to think that hard."

Mihoshi laughed.

"Kiyone, you're so considerate of others. Just write what you genuinely feel. You don't want to stay single forever, do you?"

"No…"

"Me too, honestly—I don't really have a strong image of marriage. It kind of feels like everything will just keep going on and on the same way forever… though nobody can know that."

"Yes."

Kiyone suddenly recalled Ryoko's words.

Nobody knows the future anyway…

"Maybe right now is when we're happiest."

"What's come over you, Kiyone? Having some enlightenment?"

"No, nothing like that."

Kiyone felt a heartfelt happiness at Mihoshi being right beside her.

"Hey—you were writing an extra strip, weren't you? What did you write?"

"May it be sunny tomorrow."

Mihoshi kept her eyes fixed on Kiyone's and smiled.

"A lie!"

Kiyone sensed it and pretended to glare at Mihoshi.

"S-E-C-R-E-T. Good night, Kyo-chan."

"Yes. Good night."

Even after Mihoshi was asleep, Kiyone lay awake for a while.

What is happiness?

Is marriage really the goal of happiness?

Can you truly give up everything when you fall in love…?

"I'm hopeless."

Kiyone murmured, then closed her eyes.

I don't believe in a prince charming showing up at all.

All I think about is becoming a full-fledged detective, becoming someone who doesn't trouble others.

I always thought marriage would come after, after all that.

Right now it's all I can do to keep from troubling Nobuyuki-san and Tenchi-san, and just managing my life.

Ryoko-san and Ayeka-san and the others are different—if Mihoshi and I lodged there too, we'd be taking too much advantage.

But after that?

No matter how much she thought about it, the future was vague and she couldn't form an image.

Kiyone gave up and decided to think about tomorrow when tomorrow came.

The next day it rained after all.

From the overcast sky, thin rain began falling soundlessly, and then before you noticed it would stop leaving wet stepping stones, only to come rushing down again, delighting the snails on the hydrangeas—such was the rain.

"And I made that lucky-weather doll."

Sasami looked up resentfully at the gray sky.

The Tanabata bamboo hanging at the eaves swayed softly in the fitful wind.

"Yes, but it might stop by evening."

Tenchi consoled Sasami, who had returned from school.

Yes—after various events, Sasami had started attending school.

There had been Washu's assistance and Katsuhito's efforts and all sorts of other things before she actually enrolled, but this is not the time for that story.

"Put your backpack away first."

"Okay~"

Sasami obediently went upstairs.

"Welcome home, Sasami."

Ayeka, who had been resting her elbow on the windowsill and gazing outside, turned.

"What's for dinner tonight?"

"Somen noodles. Are you hungry, Sis?"

"No… not that."

Ayeka returned her gaze to outside the window.

"The rain doesn't seem to let up."

"Hmm."

"If the rain doesn't stop, what happens to the Tanabata wishes? Do they get washed away and disappear along with the rain?"

"Hmm…"

I don't think that's how it works.

"Somehow… it feels empty."

"Sis?!"

Sasami looked back, startled.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"No…"

Ayeka gave a deep sigh.

"You're lucky, Sasami. You've fit in here so completely… looking from anywhere you're an Earth girl. It wouldn't seem strange to say you're Tenchi-sama's little sister. But I'm nothing but a freeloader here. If I went back to Jurai I'd be the first princess, but here I'm just a useless person who can't even do housework properly…"

"What happened to you, Sis?"

Sasami didn't understand why Ayeka was so down, but for now she left her homework and set about consoling her sister.

"Cheer up, Sis."

Ayeka shook her head miserably.

"Sasami can stay cheerful because Sis is here. When Sis is sad, Sasami gets sad too. And Sis is calling herself just a freeloader, but Ryoko-nee-chan and Sasami are too. Don't worry. Tenchi-nii-chan surely thinks Sis is precious… Oh! I know!"

Sasami peered at her sister's face.

"Sis, you want to marry Tenchi-nii-chan quickly, don't you?"

"Hm?"

A flush spread across Ayeka's cheeks.

"You thought if it rained you wouldn't be able to marry Tenchi-nii-chan, didn't you?"

"N-no… it's not as simple as that for me."

The way she was so earnestly making excuses meant it wasn't entirely wrong.

"Hmm… shall I go tell Tenchi-nii-chan? That Sis was crying and feeling down."

"I was not crying! Don't you dare say that to Tenchi-sama!"

Ayeka objected frantically.

"Should I~"

Sasami backed away then twirled around and was immediately all smiles, tilting her head.

"Don't worry, I won't tell. So cheer up and come downstairs. Tenchi-nii-chan will come up here if he gets worried."

"Oh, Sasami."

Ayeka finally burst out laughing.

"There, she's cheered up."

"No. It's because you teased Sis…"

Ayeka gave Sasami a mild look and smiled shyly.

"You're such a good girl."

"Hehehe…"

Sasami laughed bashfully and trotted off down the stairs with light quick steps.

The afternoon of the seventh of July faded quietly, and the rain that had seemed finally about to stop began falling again at night.
Since cold somen noodles would be chilly, the menu was hastily changed to warm noodle soup, and George and Sasami stood together in the kitchen, busy cooking.
"So it ended up raining after all."
At dinner, Kiyone looked regretfully at the Tanabata bamboo and smiled at Sasami.
"Yes. Can't be helped."
Sasami glanced briefly at her sister.
"But Sasami thinks the important thing is having made a wish. Even the Weaver Star and the Cowherd Star—if they'd given up because of a little rain, I bet the legend wouldn't have survived."
"Hey… Sasami-chan is very grown-up tonight. Did something happen?"
Ryoko, for all her rough exterior, was actually quite perceptive.
"No, nothing. Hey, Ryoko-nee-chan. If you were the Weaver Star, what would you do?"
"If I was? Obviously."
Ryoko glanced at Tenchi out of the corner of her eye and grinned.
"Rain or spears falling from the sky—doesn't matter. I'd just move over…"
In an instant Ryoko disappeared and appeared right next to Tenchi.
"Like this!"
She wrapped both arms around Tenchi's neck and hugged tight.
"Whoa, I'll spill it!"
Tenchi frantically put down his bowl.
"Ryoko!!"
"Okay okay."
Ryoko returned to her place in an instant.
"Illegal moves are not permitted."
The freshly recovered Ayeka rebuked her calmly.

"If it were me, I would surely… excuse me."

Ayeka's hand reached across the table and drew Tenchi's hand toward her.

She pressed her soft cheek against it.

"If there is true feeling, distance doesn't matter. Isn't that so, Tenchi-sama?"

"Well…"

His face became not so much troubled as thoroughly flustered.

"Grrrr…"

Ryoko's eyes went furious.

"You're the illegal one! There's supposed to be the Milky Way there. Can't teleport and yet…"

"First round—draw!"

Kiyone jumped in laughing.

"Ayeka-san, you've changed lately. You've gained confidence, haven't you?"

"Not at all. I am who I am."

She seemed to have forgotten about being secretly down in the dumps during the day.

"Sis is actually something, you know."

Ah well, so much for my worrying.

Sasami murmured in her mind.

"Kyo-chan, I really can't compete."

Mihoshi watched the exchange with a smile, and then stood up as if remembering something.

"I just remembered something I need to do. I'll be going out."

"What? What is it?"

"I'll be right back."

Mihoshi said no more and left through the front door.

"Toshiyuki-san, was it?"

Mihoshi held a blue vinyl umbrella and hurried along the road at a light run.

The small park had already sunk into the darkness of night.

The only light was a single lamp shining, its thin threads of rain glowing in the illuminated spot.

"He's not here…"

Mihoshi murmured with a mix of relief and disappointment.

If he wasn't here, she could just go back the way she'd come.

She turned to do just that, and from the road to the left, a familiar figure appeared.

"Ah…"

The young man ran over at once.

"Why are you here?"

"Ah—so you did come."

Mihoshi was in a position to look down at him.

"See, it's Tanabata, so I thought maybe you'd be here."

The young man looked puzzled.

"I got worried. Whether you'd been able to meet Spica-san."

The young man sighed and slowly shook his head.

"No luck. As you can see—it's raining."

The young man took a small canned coffee from a convenience store bag.

"Out of nowhere, but would you like some? The vending machines only have cold ones, so I went all the way to Three Stars. Besides, you came for my sake."

Mihoshi took it without thinking and then hurriedly said thank you.

The young man smiled for the first time.

"You're an unusual person. Why would you go out of your way for someone like me…"

When he smiled, the aging impression vanished like a lie, replaced by a dreamy boyish expression.

"Shall we sit… well, there's only that one spot."

There was a small roofed terrace under the streetlight, and only that spot was dry.

"I've been waiting."

Toshiyuki began to talk.

"The first time I met her was seven years ago, when I was in my first year of university. Late on Tanabata night, as I was passing through here, she appeared."
All he could say was "appeared"—that's what Toshiyuki said.
Spica descended as if a star were falling to earth.
Her bright golden shining hair, her radiant white face—everything was so dazzling he was sure he must be dreaming.
And then, as he thought that, the light softened, and Spica took the form of a beautiful woman.

Was it you who called to me?

"…Spica smiled and took my hand. For exactly one week from that night, Spica and I lived together… and on the evening of the eighth day, she disappeared just as she'd come. Only after she disappeared did I realize I knew nothing about her. Who she was, what kind of person, what country she was from, why she'd come to me. Why she'd suddenly vanished."
Toshiyuki lifted his eyes and gazed nostalgically at the sky.
"She may have been a star. Perhaps my gaze as I looked up at the Summer Triangle happened to meet her gaze as she crossed the night sky. Surely… this sounds like nonsense. You don't have to believe me."
"So that's why you wait on Tanabata night."
"Yes."
Toshiyuki smiled sadly.
"Yesterday, your back looked like Spica's for just a moment. But I never thought you'd actually come."
Thank you, Toshiyuki murmured.
"Isn't it all right to go home?"
"I believe you. Your story."
Mihoshi said with a cheerful face full of conviction.

"There is a story about races that travel between stars. They are beings of pure consciousness without physical form, and long ago a clan from a destroyed star went traveling the universe seeking a place to belong—I've heard about something like that. I've never encountered them myself, but my grandfather said he saw it in his youth. A young patrol ship pilot disappeared right in front of him. Called away by one of that clan."

"You are…"

Toshiyuki's eyes went wide.

His eyes showed surprise and awe.

"No. I'm just a first-class detective. Right now I live nearby."

Just then.

A dazzling light suddenly burst through the darkness of the night.

At the instant Mihoshi instinctively shielded her eyes, the light softened, and from within it a single woman appeared.

"Toshiyuki!"

The umbrella fell from the young man's hand.

"Spica?!"

Before Mihoshi's eyes the two held each other tightly, tightly, and seemed to melt into one.

"When I obtained your genetic information, I could not say it… that we would never meet again. So I came to say farewell. I'm going to a distant star with my companions…"

"Spica…"

Toshiyuki's eyes wavered.

"Don't go!! Please don't go!!"

Spica stopped moving suddenly, still looking into Toshiyuki's eyes.

"I cannot return. …I will lose my form."

"That's fine. I've been waiting for you. All this time."

The young man's eyes no longer held that sad color.

"Truly?"

A smile slowly rose to Spica's lips, and then became a dazzling light that illuminated her face.

"Toshiyuki…"

As Spica's body became enveloped in light, Toshiyuki's form slowly faded.

"Come with me…"

Toshiyuki's figure was absorbed into Spica's light and disappeared.

Spica closed her eyes for a moment as if trembling with joy, then emitting a strong light, vanished into the sky at unbelievable speed.

All that remained was Toshiyuki's umbrella and the darkness of the night.

"Mihoshi!"

She came to herself to see Kiyone and Tenchi running with big waves.

"So here you were. I saw last night's strip… what does 'May Toshiyuki-san meet Spica' mean?"

"She met him!"

Mihoshi suddenly threw her arms around Kiyone and buried her face, unable to hold back.

"They met!"

"W-what happened…?"

Kiyone stroked Mihoshi's hair in bewilderment, lightly patting her back to calm her.

"I was worried when you were so late—even if you're a detective, the rainy night road is dangerous."

Tenchi sighed in relief that Mihoshi was safe and smiled.

"That umbrella… were you with someone?"

Mihoshi and Kiyone ended up staying another night at the Masaki house.
As midnight approached, the rain finally stopped, and in the washed sky the summer's Great Triangle twinkled.
"In the end Tanabata was all rain."
The bamboo leaves rustled.
Ayeka opened the sliding door and turned her face up in rapture at the cool night breeze.
"Ayeka-san. I saw it."
Mihoshi came close and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.
"The moment a wish came true. If the feeling is real, a wish will cross the stars and reach its destination."
"My goodness…"
Ayeka and Ryoko looked at each other involuntarily and locked stares for a tense moment.
"Want to go at it?!"
And then, the two burst out laughing.
"I'll save it for next year. Ryoko-san, you had better be ready."
"Come any time!"
When Mihoshi retreated from the two of them, Kiyone was waiting as if she'd been poised, and whispered in her ear.
"Next year I'll write a strip too. First, to believe. Right?"
"Yes."
Mihoshi smiled.

[Garbled message - DELETED]

Heavenly Wind

'Though I make so bold without warning…'

It was in the height of summer that she noticed an Ansible mail had arrived in Washu's lab from the Galaxy Academy.

'…Wishing to receive guidance from the incomparably talented scientist Washu-dono, I have presumed to address this Ansible without regard for the impropriety. As this is an urgent matter, I do sincerely apologize, but I plan to arrive at the third planet of the solar system, Earth, Japan standard time, at one o'clock in the afternoon tomorrow. I humbly request your favorable consideration.
Doctor Taiki'

What a ponderous letter.
"Doctor Taiki… Doctor Taiki, hmm…"

Now that she thought of it, at the last conference there had been a strangely empty corner…

Washu recalled the silver-haired professor who had sat at the center of that serene space and was called Doctor Taiki.

A posture as straight as years of habit, dressed in an expensive suit and an expensive robe—not a single gap in the ensemble.

The combination of black robe and silver hair radiated a uniquely ominous aura beyond mere perfection.

Even Kagato would have seemed a mere unruly student before the professor's solemn bearing—the kind of manner, and intelligence, that made you feel that way.

Writing it like this makes him sound like an old man, but he wasn't particularly old in appearance.

By this world's age, somewhere in his late twenties—quite young for a professor at the galaxy's foremost institution.

That was Doctor Taiki—a celebrated professor who had become a singularly peculiar presence at the Galaxy Academy by virtue of his transcendent personality and all the rumors about him.

"Which means—it's today!"

Washu frowned.

He was not exactly the type she wanted to approach, but having received such a ponderous letter, she couldn't very well dismiss him outright.

Either way, with today being today, it was already too late.

"George!"

Washu raised her voice, forgetting that her assistant was sitting right there across from her.

"A worthy opponent is coming! Politely insufferable—he's almost evenly matched with me. Now is the time to bring all your abilities as butler and research assistant to bear!"

George, sitting right at the opposite monitor, started and half-rose from his chair.

"Politely… insufferable?"

"Exactly as written."

Washu answered with a weary voice, then kicked the chair and sent it into subspace storage.

"I'll be in the sample collection room this afternoon. I refuse to be made to feel like a schoolgirl by someone else at this point in my life!"

"Understood."

George bowed lightly as usual.

But inside, his anxiety circuit had reached the danger zone for a brief moment.

"So, who might this guest be…?"

"Doctor Taiki. The details are in the Ansible mail over there. I haven't deleted it."

Washu said curtly and walked out of the lab with a displeased face.

"Oh, Washu-san. What's with the stern face?"

Tenchi looked up from the magazine he was reading.

"Oh, Tenchi-dono. Weren't you going out today?"

The vertical line on Washu's forehead softened slightly.

"That guy Amagasaki—sudden change of plans, so we decided to put it off until next week… did something happen?"

"Oh, nothing really. It just turned out a guest is coming."

"A guest?"

Tenchi tilted his head.

In any case, a guest coming to Washu's was unusual.

"Oh, do we have any sweets for tea? I'll go buy something."

"Oh no, it's fine. If anything, it'd be more helpful if you just turned a broom upside down."

Washu answered with a gloomy face, then looked around the living room, shrugged, and disappeared back into the lab.

"What was that about?"

"I don't know how things stand."
Ryoko and Ayeka exchanged glances from the rafters and floor level respectively.
"Sounded like she didn't really want this guest coming…"
Tenchi was baffled too.

Before one o'clock.
The summer sun had reached its peak, and the heat was such that even the air seemed to shimmer.
On days like this, you either stayed indoors in the air-conditioning or splashed around at the water's edge—there was no other option.
"I wonder who the guest is…"
Tenchi, who had decided to spend the whole day lounging at home, couldn't stop thinking about it.
"Don't worry, Tenchi-san. I'll take care of it properly."
George had come into the living room at some point and was watching the on-all-day TV.
"Almost one o'clock…"
And then, synchronized with the one o'clock chime as if on cue, the front doorbell rang.
"Coming."
George hurried to the entrance, with Tenchi, Ryoko, and Ayeka following behind.
"Is this Washu-dono's laboratory?"
Standing at the entrance was a tall man wrapped in a jet-black robe.
Silver hair with a lustrous wave was swept back, and there was the ghost of a faint smile on his lips.
"My apologies for the intrusion. I am Doctor Taiki. I have an appointment with Washu-dono today at one in the afternoon."
In this heat, not a drop of sweat showed.
His features were refined—so perfectly so that they even gave a hint of artificiality.

With perfectly flawless good looks, a perfectly flawless build, and perfectly flawless bearing, Tenchi involuntarily looked down at his own T-shirt.

"Oh, um…"

In terms of greeting etiquette, it was a complete defeat for Tenchi.

"And you are?"

The professor's eyes fell on Tenchi with a heated look.

"How beautiful… how supple…"

"Welcome, and thank you for coming. You are Doctor Taiki, are you not? I am the butler, George. This is the son of the master of the Masaki household, Tenchi-dono. Behind him are the first princess of the Jurai royal family, Princess Ayeka, and a friend, Ryoko-dono. Washu-dono is presently in the laboratory. Please, do come in. Allow me to show you the way."

George returned the greeting politely.

Their respective courtesies were a formidable match.

"How kind."

The professor gave Ayeka a perfunctory nod.

"Ah, so you are the rumored princess of the Jurain royal family. Rather eccentric, though—going to the trouble of residing on this primitive planet and dressing like an ordinary person…—well then, if you'll excuse me. On this remote planet, one removes one's shoes, I believe?"

The professor produced indoor slippers from an antique leather trunk and changed into them with an unhurried, dignified manner.

"By the way, young man—"

The professor's eyes traveled slowly from the bottom of Tenchi's feet to the top of his head.

"So you are the one they call Tenchi-dono, the strongest swordsman in the universe. Perhaps we could speak at length later."

"Ah, yes…"

Tenchi felt his spine tingle for no reason he could name.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me."

Just as the professor, accompanied by an oddly heated stare, was about to enter the lab.

"TAIKI-CHAN~!"

An excited voice and a figure like a whirlwind came flying in.

"How could Taiki-chan just suddenly disappear! It was incredibly hard chasing after you! Here—Gokki-chan. You were trying to forget him on purpose and push him onto me, weren't you? No you don't!"

The girl shoved a metal capsule into the professor's hand.

"That's T-top secret military intelligence not for public release…"

The professor cut himself short, swiftly pocketing the metal capsule inside his mantle.

"Y-you! Your shoes. Take off your shoes! And how many times have I told you—call me Doctor Taiki!"

The professor turned on the girl with a rattled expression unlike anything seen before, nervously pointing at her feet.

"What? Shoes? What about shoes?"

She looked around as if finally noticing.

"Oh? There are people here? Right—the local people. How do you do, I'm Fuka. I'm Doctor Taiki's research assistant—the universe's number one genius student!"

"T-the universe's number one genius student?!"

And why are you in my house?!

A simple question crossed Tenchi's mind.

Without concern, the girl kicked off her shoes and sent them flying into the entrance. Red and white sneakers with a loud pattern—but compared to her outfit, they looked almost understated.

As for her outfit: a mini one-piece in light blue covered in outrageously loud fluorescent-color space creatures, stations, and stars, paired with candy-colored bracelets and chokers of every color, plus large rings, hair ornaments, ribbons—so festive your eyes flickered just looking at her.

"Call me Fuka-chan ♡"

The girl smiled and forcibly seized the professor's arm, dragging him into the living room.

"Wow! What a cheap house! Natural materials! So retro, so cute!"

The girl dropped the professor's arm and touched walls and furniture everywhere, watched the TV, peered into drawers and boxes, and let out exclamations of wonder.

"You! Fuka! Even if this is a primitive world, it's rude to the people here. Besides, how did you know where I was going?!"

The professor took out a pure white handkerchief and pressed it to his temple.

"Did you think that little thing would fool me? That's too naive, too naive. I just threatened the dean a little—said it was a crisis of Galaxy Academy's existence—and he gave me permission to pass through the gate right away. You see, the hard part was the travel preparations. Because there's none of my favorite sweets or shows or games here."

When the girl touched the gemstone on her bracelet, a mountain of luggage rained down from subspace.

"Oh, everything came out. Hey, Taiki-chan, can you help too? Look, I even properly brought the Gokki-chan culture set. Ahh, it's hot! Sorry, but is there any isotonic water or something?"

"Isotonic?!"

Suddenly addressed, Tenchi involuntarily backed away.

"H2O, plain water will do. I'm technically a Jurain-type humanoid."

"P-plain water's fine? Happy to help."

Tenchi dashed into the kitchen in relief, and came back with a full glass of cold water.

"Phew… thanks, big brother!"

Fuka drank the water in no time at all, smiled, and handed the glass back to Tenchi.

"You're so kind! You're like Fuka's big brother. You know, Fuka's big brother is the supervisor of the Galaxy Police's delivery section. I'll send you something next time. Hey, Taiki-chan, stop standing there and help with the luggage!"

George, Tenchi, Ryoko, and Ayeka—left standing helplessly—looked at each other.

"I-I'll go fetch Washu-dono."

George scurried out of the living room, and left behind were the three even more helpless members.

"Is that it? Is this Washu's guest?!"

"Well, I don't really…"

Ayeka was already on the defensive.

"Ryoko, please."

Anticipating catastrophe, Tenchi quickly made his appeal.

"Not my problem this time. What exactly am I supposed to do with such a noisy kid?!"

"Ryoko-san, don't go!"

Ayeka grabbed Ryoko's sleeve firmly.

"I'm at a complete loss too… we have no idea what's going on…"

"What?! The Juraian first princess?!"

A startling voice suddenly rang out, and Fuka came flying over and clasped Ayeka's hands firmly.

"You're her?! Then you're a real princess. I'm from a perfectly ordinary family, so I've never been this close to a princess in my life! Why are you living in a place like this?"

"Well, um…"

You're asking me to explain everything from the beginning?

Ayeka felt a headache starting and shook her head involuntarily.

"Oh, it's fine, don't explain. I can hear it later, and I'm not that interested in other people's circumstances anyway. More importantly—there's a legendary genius scientist here, right? Where?"

"Right here, young lady."

Washu arrived with a gloomy face, George in tow.

"What's all this luggage? Coming into someone's home out of nowhere—what kind of child are you?!"

"Are you Washu-dono?!"

Fuka released Ayeka's hands and came flying to Washu, clasping both her hands firmly.

"Kyaa~! I've seen the legendary person up close! Hey hey, for my summer homework I'm trying to make a living spaceship, but the energy conversion program isn't going well. And there's the Gokki-chan cultivation system there—I want to construct an induction program to cause cuter mutations. Could you help? No?"

"What? You said Gokki? How did you get it out? Where is it?"

Suddenly Washu's eyes lit up.

"Over here."

An exhausted voice—Washu turned around and there was the black-caped figure buried in luggage.

"I am Doctor Taiki. This was not supposed to happen…"

The professor produced the metal capsule.

"This container will last no more than twelve Earth hours. I am terribly sorry to impose, but could you lend me a dimensional lock device? If this microorganism were to leak out, all life on this planet would die within six hours."

"WHAT?!"

Tenchi nearly collapsed.

"W-is Washu-san all right?!"

"I'm fine. My composition is different from Earth people. Ryoko should be fine too, but Earth and Jurai types are in danger. Which means Doctor, and Fuka-chan, you too are at risk."

"What?! Hey, you! You did this didn't you! A great job that was! This is exactly why I hate kids! We were living in peace, and you brought something outrageous into our home!"

Ryoko teleported and appeared before Fuka, immediately seizing her collar.

"What are you going to do about this?! You're going to take responsibility, aren't you? Hm?"

"Young lady, please refrain from violence! She is my student however much she may be."

The professor, pale-faced but brave enough to intervene, was gleefully clung to by Fuka.

"Taiki-chan, you're so cool! You're protecting me!"

"That's not quite… in any case, I cannot abide violent women!"

"Oh, is that so! Then shall I fold you both at once?!"

Ryoko was already in rage mode.

"Stop, Ryoko. Beating them up won't solve anything. More importantly, we need to do something, or Washu-san can never come out of the lab again."

Having jumped in, Tenchi had no solution himself.

"That's right. Inconvenient for me. So, Fuka-chan, these are yours—think of a countermeasure."

"What? I hadn't thought that far. The Galaxy Police's higher-ups were the ones who asked for a weapon—not me. Right, Taiki-chan?"

Fuka tilted her head and stole a glance at the professor.

"The aim was, essentially, as a deterrent against the two great powers… no, none of that matters now. The reason the weapon is unfinished is that a reliable harmlessness system has not yet been established. Too many unknowns. This makes it too dangerous to use even as a weapon."

"So in short, Doctor—you want the greatest genius in the universe to do something about it?"

Washu grinned from within the lab where a bioweapon was apparently running rampant.

"Very well. I'll remake it into the most perfect ultimate weapon imaginable. But it will cost you. A simple indemnity won't cover it. Let's say—patent on the program and secondary usage fees?"

"No! No weapons!"

Fuka glared sharply at the monitor.

"She's my Gokki-chan! I never wanted her to be a bioweapon in the first place! Washu-sensei may be the greatest scientist in the universe, but you're truly wicked!!"

"W-wicked?!"

Behind the monitor, Washu involuntarily reeled.

"Oh~?!"

From outside the monitor came the sound of restrained applause.

"George! Stop clapping right now or you're fired!"

With Washu's voice, the clapping stopped instantly.

"All right. Let's see what you can do, Fuka-chan. If you win, I'll help with any homework or whatever. If I win, I'll be taking Gokki-chan."

"Accepted!"

Fuka glared at Washu, then turned to the Masaki household members standing blankly.

"So—I need your cooperation. Is there any beneficial microorganism for the human body that you can get your hands on right now?"

"Microorganism?!"

Tenchi dug through the school-era knowledge in his head.

"All I can think of is natto bacteria or lactic acid bacteria…"

"Doing great~"

Washu was grinning on the other side of the monitor.

"Either is fine. Get them quickly!"

"Here."

At Fuka's intensity, Tenchi dashed to the kitchen and came back with a pack of natto and some natural yogurt.

"Let me taste… bleech~!"

Fuka wiped her natto-covered fingers on the professor's robe.

"This one's better. A bit sour, but."

"Shall I bring some sugar?"

"Does it get sweet? Yes."

Fuka hugged the yogurt—which Tenchi had sweetened with sugar at her request—and was tasting it with a blissful expression, then suddenly looked up.

"If I keep doing this it'll all be gone. Tenchi-san, hold this for a moment. Give me Gokki-chan!"

"Sure, sure."

Fuka snatched Gokki-chan back and ran to a corner of the room, opened the lid of a massive cultivation system like a giant water purifier, and threw her in.

"Yogurt!"

She poured in the yogurt contents next.

"Any more?"

"I've got Biofermin—it's a stomach medicine made of lactic acid bacteria."

Tenchi thought this was awfully rough-and-ready, but wisely didn't say so.

"That too!"

Once everything was in, Fuka pulled a laptop from her luggage and began typing like a machine gun.

"I wrote a gene conversion induction program with lactic acid bacteria properties as the main focus—I think this should work. The flavor is perfect too!"

"The flavor?!"

Tenchi backed away step by step until he hit the wall and had no choice but to stop.

"3, 2, 1… done~!"

She took Gokki-chan out of the cultivation system.

"Transfer this to the lab and press the middle button—that should do it. But where's the transfer machine?"

The gazes of Tenchi, Ayeka, and Sasami converged on Ryoko.

"Not doing it! What happens if I get sick?!"

"You can do subspace transfer? Then please."

Fuka ignored Ryoko's protest and smiled.

"Absolutely no problem! I'm the universe's number one genius student, aren't I?"

"Ugh…"

It goes without saying that Ryoko screamed inwardly—I absolutely hate geniuses!

Ryoko pinched Gokki-chan and disappeared in an instant, appearing inside the monitor.

"Here I am! I pressed the middle button too—now what?"

"Waiting for her to change form~♡"

Fuka wriggled excitedly.

Then from Gokki-chan a milky-white mist suddenly blew out, and the inside of the monitor was engulfed in mist.

"Activation confirmed! Now we just wait for the mist to clear!"

They held their breath and waited three minutes.

The monitor showed Washu and Ryoko engulfed in milky-white candy.

"Ugh. The whole place smells like yogurt."

Washu shrugged with a resigned look.

"Then it's a great success! It's safe to open the door now!"

When the lab door opened, Ryoko tumbled out along with a flood of candy.

"Well, let me check the flavor—"

Before the professor could stop her, Fuka popped a candy into her mouth.

"Yep—pretty yogurt flavor! As expected, I'm a genius!"

"Tenchi-dono! You—!"

A choked voice suddenly came in his ear, and Tenchi found himself firmly embraced by the tall professor.

"You dealt with that child so well. Even I can't handle her—won't you come to my seminar sometime? Let's go fishing and talk the night away about life's mysteries."

"Fishing, is it?"

Tenchi was astounded and began working to free himself from the professor's arms.

"I have the fields to tend…"

"The fields can wait! From the moment I saw you, I knew. You are the boy I've been looking for—no, the student! Come with me…"

"TAIKI-CHAN!!"

Fuka yanked the professor's robe forcefully.

"You're always doing this the moment I look away! I told you to stop being such a pervert—didn't I tell you that just the other day?! Listen—I'm reminding you one more time because I don't want you to forget—Taiki-chan is Fuka-chan's teacher!"

"Before that, you have your summer homework."

Washu jumped in with a grin, wedging herself between the wide-eyed Tenchi and Fuka.

"The universe's number one Washu-sensei will keep a close eye on you. Be prepared."

"What, really?! Yay!!"

Fuka clapped her hands happily.

"While I'm at it, let's make a special deal. I'll keep Gokki-chan a secret, and in exchange you'll be Washu-chan's apprentice for the next year. What do you say?"

"Um… okay."

Fuka's face twitched slightly.

"Then go get formal permission from the dean. Understood?"

Washu smiled and glanced at the professor meaningfully.

"Washu-dono, most grateful…"

The professor started to speak, but Washu cut him off with the utmost elaborate courtesy.

"Oh no, please—that we had you come all this way and could extend no proper hospitality—how it weighs on me."

A grin.

And so, Washu cleverly acquired an excellent first apprentice in place of an ultimate weapon.

SUBJ... I'm doing great! ♡

Washu-sensei, thanks so much!!
Last time was incredibly incredibly educational and fun.
I had the BEST time!!!
Hey, there's still tons of that yogurt-flavored candy, right? (Well obviously there would be.)
I'm giving it all to Washu-sensei!
I caused you so much trouble, so please share it with everyone.
Oh but you know—if there's any left over, I'd be happy if you could send a little bit via Galaxy Police delivery or something.
Just a little, just a tiny bit.
Because I don't want cavities, and eating it every single day I'd get chubby.

You know, Taiki-chan went home and collapsed in bed.
I was saying things like—Fuka is such a super genius, right? I'm so smart, right?
Taiki-chan is so lucky to have an apprentice like me, right?—and then:

"I'm sorry, Fuka. Please give me one week off. The dean will look after you."

He said! It's like I'm some terrible little brat?!
And then he really went straight home and into bed!!

Oh, so that's why Fuka is at the dean's house now.

And I was thinking about how to say thank you, so I'm sending some new product drugs by separate post.
They make your head go all floaty and it's SO fun!!
Keep it a little secret from the dean, okay? Don't tell on me.
Oh, I'm definitely going to do the homework Washu-sensei assigned!
Fundamental theories on properties of matter and matter conversion in hyperdimensions. (Hmm, that's pretty hard!)
Well then.
About the apprenticeship—everyone is saying "hold on a moment!" Why?!
Say hi to Tenchi-san and Sasami-chan ♡

-From Fuka-chan

Nayuta

"Tenchi-nii-chan, what should I do?!"
Sasami came home waving a notice paper and called out the moment she stepped through the door.
"Is Sis upstairs? I have to show her this."
"What's wrong, Sasami-chan, in such a rush?"
Tenchi, who happened to be home, looked up in surprise at Sasami's back as she dashed up the stairs.
It was a clear autumn afternoon, with the new semester underway and mornings and evenings finally starting to feel a little cooler.

Sasami turning back from the stairs with her red school backpack still on was the picture of an Okayama elementary schooler.

"Parents' observation day! This Saturday is parents' observation day!"

"Parents' observation day?"

What a nostalgic phrase… when I was in elementary school, Father always came. When he couldn't make it, Grandpa came instead, and that was a little scary.

Tenchi finally made the connection.

"I see. Sasami-chan, who will…"

No answer came back.

Sasami had already dashed into her sister's room.

"Sis, did you see it? Do you understand?"

Ayeka had been holding the notice and was deep in thought, so Sasami finally lost patience.

"Here it says 'all parents.' Parents means it would be Uncle Nobuyuki or Elder Brother Yosho, wouldn't it? Who comes for your friends?"

"Mothers or fathers. Some have both come."

"My goodness… so Father and Mother in Jurai would need to be notified too."

Ayeka furrowed her brow in concern.

"What?! From Jurai?"

Sasami's eyes went wide.

"Just Sis is fine. If we do that it'll turn into a big commotion again. Hey, can I go play? Sasami has a promise with Yuki-chan."

As she spoke she stood up and reached for the door.

"Wait, Sasami! We're not finished talking."

"I'll listen later~"

The blue-tinted hair swayed—and already the pitter-patter of feet on the stairs was receding.

"Oh, Sasami—"

Ayeka complained to the abandoned backpack, then smiled with resignation.
"Every day is so fun she can barely stand it. She'll be absolutely astonished, Father seeing her so tanned."
The backpack had a keychain and lunch bag from an amusement park dangling from it, and several glittering stickers plastered on.
Since starting school, her socks were always black, there were scrapes on her knees, and a distinct swimsuit tan line had appeared on her back.
The clothes and sneakers she wore to school had multiplied, along with cute stationery, and an area of secrets had appeared in Sasami's desk drawer without anyone noticing.
When you peeked in thinking she was diligently working on homework, she'd be writing in an exchange diary.
"Sis, don't look!"
If you accidentally peeked, she'd cover it with both hands at once, so it was obvious.
Each of these childlike changes was adorable, and Ayeka felt she was glad she'd let her little sister go to school.

Sasami had started at the elementary school in mid-June of that year.
Through a chance encounter, Sasami had snuck into the elementary school and made friends with one girl, one teacher, and one ghost girl—and firmly resolved "I'm definitely going to school."
Learning of her beloved little sister's firm resolve, Ayeka had consulted Nobuyuki, Nobuyuki had consulted Katsuhito, they'd obtained the agreement of Father Jurai Emperor Asuza and Mother Misaki and Funaho, Katsuhito had negotiated with the elementary school principal, and Sasami had enrolled happily in Third Grade Class 1.
Sasami was nine years old, with her guardian listed as Katsuhito and elder sister Ayeka, and needless to say all the paperwork required for enrollment—residence certificates and all—was prepared by Washu.
"This isn't even worth calling before-breakfast work," in Washu's own words.

"If she wanted to go to school, we should have arranged it sooner. Sasami-chan, just tell Washu-chan anything you want. Look—big sis and big brother are all so vague."

"I was having quite a hard time myself!"

In Ayeka's words.

"Both Misaki-Okaasama and Funaho-Okaasama agreed immediately, but Father—he was so stubborn. He said rather than going to a local school, come back to Jurai, he'd immediately set up a special class in the royal Academy… and I had to soothe him and persuade him, when he said I'll come to pick her up tomorrow, bring you back at the same time…"

"Nothing to it."

In Katsuhito's words.

"After I said one word, didn't he immediately raise the white flag? Leave anything about this planet to me. His Majesty is just being stubborn because he's lonely. Difficult for a Juraian Emperor."

"Yosho-dono is really a sly one. Saying Sasami-chan might get so desperate she'd run away…"

In secret, Washu, Katsuhito, and Ayeka had formed a joint front and repelled the Juraian Emperor.

"Did I say that? Well, since she got into school safely, let's call it a success."

And so Sasami had begun school life as Masaki Sasami.

It goes without saying that the cheerful, energetic Sasami immediately became the class favorite.

At first there were many things about school life that bewildered her, but she quickly made friends, attended the swimming pool days without missing a single day over summer vacation, learned the hardship of homework, and was now by every measure a proper third-grade elementary student.

"What, a parents' observation day?"

Nobuyuki leaned over from across the dinner table.

"Which day, which period? Tenchi, you should tell me important things earlier."

"Saturday, fourth period. I only heard today too."

Tenchi looked at the suspiciously pleased father and nearly burst out laughing.

"Fourth period means around eleven o'clock. Right—I'll cancel all my morning work. After all, it's Sasami-chan's first observation day. Ayeka-san, Grandpa is coming too, right?"

"Yes, of course."

Ayeka smiled and exchanged a glance with Katsuhito.

"We'll need to make a report to Father Asuza and the mothers too afterwards. Tenchi-sama and Washu-san are coming too, aren't you? I'm sure Ryoko-san will be the one to look after the house."

"Why am I the one watching the house?"

Ryoko immediately protested.

"Of course I'm going. What is a parents' observation day anyway?"

"There'd be too many of us—wouldn't the teacher be in trouble?"

Tenchi hastily intervened.

"Ryoko, an observation day is when you go to watch a class that you don't normally get to see. You have to stand quietly at the back of the classroom and just watch—calling out to her, wandering around, teleporting—all of it is forbidden."

"So we just watch."

Ryoko looked disappointed.

"I thought it'd be more fun. Fine. I want to see Sasami-chan's school too—I'll just behave during the class, right?"

"No, no, absolutely not."

Ayeka cut in.

"The notice clearly says 'all parents.' Ryoko-san, you're not a guardian, are you? Sasami's guardians are myself as her sister, Elder Brother Yosho, Uncle Nobuyuki, and Tenchi-sama—four people. Surely only those of Juraian blood should be there."

"Dad's not Juraian. Washu has nothing to do with it either."

Ryoko pushed back.

"Ayeka, you're really set on keeping me away, aren't you? Fine, let's settle this outside. Let's fight, and whoever wins goes. Thirty minutes, one round!"

"Stop it!"

Sasami shouted, so Ayeka and Ryoko turned around in surprise.

"Sis, stop! Sasami doesn't want to cause trouble for the class and the teacher! Fighting means neither Sis nor Ryoko-nee-chan can come! And anyway, normally only one or two people come. Sasami wants to be a normal kid. So even just Tenchi-nii-chan is fine."

"Me?"

I'm still a minor, a sixteen-year-old[1] who doesn't even go to school.

Tenchi was inwardly taken aback.

Well, there were kids whose grandmothers and grandfathers came, but just me alone would…

"Sasami-chan, wouldn't it be even more conspicuous if just I went? After all, wouldn't it be better for Ayeka-san and Father or Grandpa to go?"

"Hmm…"

Sasami tilted her head with a troubled look.

"I really want Misaki-Okaasama and Funaho-Okaasama to come. But then Father would come along too. Sasami wants Sis and Ryoko-nee-chan and Tenchi-nii-chan and Washu-chan and Ryo-Ohki-chan and everyone in this house to come—but if that happened, surely all my classmates would ask 'why?'"

Sasami stacked her dishes and stood up.

"Fine, observation day. Sasami will go alone."

Before the astonished group could stop her, Sasami ran upstairs.

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[1] This is a hysterical retcon because last novel he was 17 She has to keep de-aging him because she keeps writing these multi season story compilations..

"Okay, Sis, I'm off!"

The next morning, Sasami ate normally and left the house cheerfully.

"Have a good day. Study hard."

After seeing her off, Ayeka suddenly turned to Tenchi.

"Hey, Tenchi-sama… am I a failure as a sister…?"

"Not at all. I think… she's probably at a complicated age."

Recalling yesterday's Sasami, Tenchi immediately set about comforting Ayeka.

"For the observation day, I really think Ayeka-san should go. I'll keep watch over Ryoko with Washu-san."

"With Washu-san?"

Ayeka tilted her head.

"You know, there was that fly-shaped spy-eye mechanism. The one used when Ryoko went berserk at the convenience store before…"

Tenchi was actually a little embarrassed.

"We'll watch on the monitor in the lab. That way there's no problem."

"My goodness…"

Ayeka's eyes went wide, and then she smiled.

I see. Tenchi-sama also wants to see Sasami's observation day.

How kind of him, looking after Ryoko as an excuse…

"In return—"

Tenchi suddenly lowered his voice and whispered in Ayeka's ear.

"Please take Father along. If he can't go, he might be so heartbroken he runs away from home."

"Of course I'll go with him. We owe Uncle Nobuyuki more than words can say."

The fact that Tenchi had leaned close made her blush involuntarily.

"Oh, some sort of discussion? This Saturday is going to be fun. Maybe I'll buy a new tie."

Nobuyuki, who was about to head out, slapped Ayeka cheerfully on the back and walked out the door humming.

"I'm glad Sasami-hime has cheered up."

George, the butler and cook who had just finished clearing up after breakfast, came to see off the master of the household.

"These days Sasami-hime has become very much like a child. I love the Sasami-hime of today. She must be much happier than going to school on Jurai… oh, I've said too much."

George gave a respectful bow to Ayeka.

"I'll do my best with dinner that day. Something autumnal would be nice."

"Oh, thank you. I'll look forward to it."

Ayeka returned the bow, and wondered to herself how she would spend the day today.

Somehow… I feel like I've become a mother.

Fussing over a child, keeping the house in order, listening to school stories.

Washing the indoor shoes and gym clothes once a week, making sure the collection money is exact down to the last penny, helping with homework…

Oh—if I were to marry Tenchi-sama and live in this house, if we were to have children and raise them here.

Sending children to school like ordinary people and cooking meals while waiting for my husband to come home—is that what I would be doing?

This imagination far exceeded Ayeka's capacity for grasping reality and made her heart pound.

Ayeka cupped her cheeks in both hands, left the puzzle as it was, stood up, and slipped quietly to the bathroom to look at her reflection in the mirror.

"I love you, Tenchi-sama!!"

She pressed her cheeks dreamily with both hands.

"……"

Tenchi, who had barely managed to stop at the bathroom entrance, backed away quietly with a deeply complicated expression.

He had been terrified by the daydream, which seemed about to overflow with hearts even from outside the door.

"What shall I wear. I must ask Sasami's friends too."

Ayeka floated happily out of the bathroom and went up the stairs with a dancing gait.

"A call from Earth on the Ansible, dear."

Juraian Emperor Asuza, who had been inwardly weary of listening to petitions from a provincial nobleman, turned around at the words of his wife Misaki.

"What? From Earth?! Excuse me for a moment. Get the page there to bring you some refreshments while you wait."

Asuza gave a dignified bow and left the room briskly, escorting his wife.

He could actually use the Ansible terminal even while staying in the room, but in essence he had simply used it as an excuse to escape.

"Is it Ayeka or Sasami? Not that something has happened to the two of them…?"

"No, that's not it."

Misaki laughed in amusement.

"Yosho-dono says he wants to speak with you directly. Something about Sasami's observation day, apparently."

"Observation day?"

When they entered Misaki's private chamber, Funaho was earnestly chatting with her own son.

"Then Ayeka made a curry? My, how nice. Has she improved at cooking?"

Funaho laughed and turned.

"Miss Misaki's young lady made a dish, apparently. The taste was so-so, I was told. Here you are."

"Mm."

Asuza sat before the Ansible and addressed his son, who looked considerably older than he did.

"Yosho. At least fix that appearance when speaking with me. Really, it's like talking with an old retainer—most disagreeable."

"I'm calling from the shrine office. Someone might come by."

Katsuhito on the other side of the monitor answered with a poker face, then suddenly broke into a grin.

"Father. Won't you pay an incognito visit here?"

Katsuhito's eyes sparkled with a young man's brightness.

"This Saturday there's an observation day. How about it—would you like to see Sasami studying in an Earth elementary school?"

"Is that what this is about?!"

The Juraian Emperor leaned forward.

"Of course I'll come. What time? As for attendants—I'll have them wait outside. I'll need to bring a gift too. Is Sasami's teacher a woman? How old? If she likes, I could invite her to the royal banquet."

"No. I said incognito."

Katsuhito's voice turned into a young man's and was completely at odds with his appearance.

"No attendants whatsoever. Ayeka had absolutely no intention of notifying Your Majesty. No gift either. And please also remove the Juraian Emperor's formal robes."

"You intend to have me remove my clothing?!"

Asuza's eyes went wide.

"What am I supposed to wear? I have never removed my formal robes in public even once."

"Please wear a business suit with a tie. The two mothers—Misaki-Mother and Funaho-Mother—would look well in kimono or a suit. I'll send a sample separately to have the palace tailors make them. Now listen carefully—just watch, that's all. I'll let you know the classroom location later, so please arrive a little late. That way Ayeka will find it impossible to turn you away."

"A most welcome offer, and I am most grateful."

Asuza nodded toward the monitor.

"What wind blows you to such consideration? Unlike you to be this thoughtful."

"Oh, I just love my little sister." Katsuhito grinned.

"My little sister wants her mother to come, just like all the other children."

"Not her father?"Asuza murmured in dissatisfaction, but quickly continued eagerly.

"Understood. I shall follow your every word. I'll cancel all official duties that day and wait. I'll have the ship on standby in subspace. Speaking of which, Yosho—what's in it for you?"

"What's that?"

Katsuhito asked back with feigned innocence.

"I am satisfied just to see Sasami's happy face. It does weigh on me as an elder brother to deceive Ayeka, but…"

Katsuhito glanced briefly outside the monitor.

"How about some fine sake? If you have some of Father's prized Tsukimizake I couldn't ask for more."

"So that's what you're after."

Asuza burst out laughing.

"Very well, I'll bring the finest secret sake of the Juraian royal family. Nayuta (meaning: A Huge number/abundance). A secret sake among secret sakes, said to have been hand-polished by our Jurai royal family's guardian deity, Tsunami herself."

"I am deeply grateful."

Katsuhito bowed deeply, and after cutting the Ansible, he pumped his fist in a full victory pose.

In Jurai, needless to say, the provincial nobleman who had been waiting in the audience chamber got his petition approved with no fuss whatsoever.

Now, observation day arrived under an unfortunately overcast sky.

A harbinger of the autumn's long rains.

"So Sis and Uncle Nobuyuki are coming then. Tenchi-nii-chan and Ryoko-nee-chan aren't?"

Sasami shoveled furikake rice with a face that was partly disappointed and partly relieved.

"They'll watch in Washu-san's lab using the fly-shaped spy-eye."

"I must be the only one carrying something like that to school."

Sasami stuffed the spy-eye in her pocket and put down her chopsticks and stood up.

"I'm off! Oh no, if I don't hurry I'll be late!"

"Sasami, do your best. Sis will be there with you."

"Okay~"

After Sasami left with the same cheerful face as always, Ayeka dashed upstairs and began carefully applying makeup.

On the wall hung the D&G (Dulce and Gabana) suit she'd agonized over purchasing for just this day.

She put on the super lift-up brassière and long girdle that had never had occasion to be worn since buying them, tied her hair up high and put on the suit—the result was a fragrant, unmistakably feminine elegance.

"Now—to battle!"

She declared war to her reflection in the mirror, then walked down the stairs with impeccable posture.

"Wow! Is that you, Ayeka-san? Incredible—you look just like an actress!"

Nobuyuki's eyes went wide watching TV in the living room.

"Wow…"

Tenchi was utterly thunderstruck at Ayeka's suited figure, which he'd never seen before.

She's an adult—how can such a beautiful person say she loves me?!

"Does it look strange somewhere?"

Ayeka instantly turned back into a princess, flushing as she looked to Tenchi for his reaction.

"No… not at all, not at all!"

Tenchi hurriedly waved his hands.

He wasn't sure what he was saying himself.

"Father, we're going by car, right? Not walking down a country road?"

"Tenchi, are you all right?!"

Nobuyuki turned around with an exasperated look.

"Of course we're going by car. It would be a sin to make such a beautiful person walk."

"Thank you very much."

Ayeka returned a light bow, looked up at the clock, and was momentarily struck.

It had only just turned nine o'clock.

"That outfit—isn't that the one some femme fatale was wearing? Seems a bit much for you, doesn't it?"

Ryoko's eyes blazed gold.

"I've Decided! Tenchi, I'm going too. I'll get changed."

Ryoko vanished in a flash and reappeared wearing a vivid sky-blue micro mini dress.

"Let's do this, Ayeka!!"

"Oh my… DKNY."

The two women locked sharp stares.

Sasami, who had gone to school as usual, was nervously awaiting fourth period.

"Yuki-chan's mom—where is she?"

She whispered hurriedly so as not to be scolded again.

"Over there. The one on the corridor side in the navy skirt."

Sasami quickly craned her neck at the parents lined up in the back.

Sis and Uncle Nobuyuki hadn't arrived yet.

"Maybe I should have just had Sis come after all."

Just then, the sound of quick footsteps in the corridor, and Sasami reflexively looked.

"Sis…? Ryoko-nee-chan?!"

Sasami's eyes went perfectly round.

Th-this glamorous and gorgeous suit… this isn't Sis as she usually is?!

"Here—it says Class 3-1. Oh! Sasami-chan."

"Ryoko-san, quiet!"

The observing rows stirred, and the children turned around with their mouths open.

"Wow… what a beautiful mom!"

"It's the Masakis—she said Sasami-chan."

"Sh-she's not my mom! She's my big sister!"

Sasami couldn't help retorting, and the whole classroom burst into laughter.

"Now let's open our textbooks. Today we'll do pages forty-three through forty-seven. Now, who would like to read from the third line?"

The teacher—who had also been staring along with the children—came back to herself and re-opened her textbook.

"Me!"

The children raised their hands all at once.

After all, every child had been told to raise their hand at least once.

Just reading was easy enough to raise your hand for.

"Uncle Nobuyuki is all the way at the end…"

Sasami's mind was elsewhere—raising her hand was the last thing on her mind—but Nobuyuki in a proper suit with a brand new tie was watching Sasami from the very end, beaming with all the joy in the world.

"Okay, next reader."

The children raised their hands all at once again.

This time Sasami raised hers too.

Better to get the quota done with sooner rather than later.

"Yes, Masaki-san."

"Yes!"

Sasami answered brightly and stood up, took a breath.

Just then.

"Pardon me. Is this Class 3-1?"

A deep baritone resonated, and a tall man came striding into the classroom.

A well-tailored black suit, a tie with a family crest—a magnificent handsome man with piercing eyes.

"Please don't interrupt the other observers."

A woman wearing a Chanel suit with the bearing of some foreign queen gently admonished him.

"Excuse me, coming through."

A black-haired woman in an incomprehensibly expensive yūzen kimono followed graciously.

———————————

"M-Misaki… Funaho-Okaasama?!"

Ayeka stood slack-jawed, and Misaki quickly put a finger to her lips.

Sasami stood with her mouth hanging open, nearly dropping her textbook.

"F-Father! Mother?!"

"What?! Masaki's parents?"

The class was in an uproar.

"Wow… I thought he was some kind of king."

"Is Masaki's family maybe super rich? Like they have a Benz and a cruiser?"

"Sasami, face forward. That's disrespectful to the teacher."

The man reprimanded sharply, then fixed the teacher with a penetrating gaze.

"I apologize for the interruption. Please continue the lesson."

"Y-yes."

What a deep, masculine voice…!

The teacher gripped the textbook that was nearly falling from her hand and straightened her posture in a hurry.

"Then, Masaki-san, starting from page forty-six."

"Y-yes!"

Sasami began haltingly reading from the textbook.

Why? How did Father and Mother come to be here?! Who called them?

A mountain of questions swirled in her mind.

The children excitedly kept turning to look back, whispering to each other, and the parents looked around in astonishment, exchanging glances.

The man in question kept his arms folded with composure, listening quietly to Sasami's voice.

"…s-so, the n-next day too, f-father did n-not come h-home…"

It was a sad story set in Hiroshima near the end of the war.

The Juraian Emperor—dressed for the first time in the history of the Juraian royal family in something called a suit—listened gravely to the story of war, then suddenly flashed his eyes open and spoke in a voice that carried to the next classroom.

"Cease your whispering! You are learning the history of a nation!"

Instantly the classroom went utterly silent, and thirty-seven students—seventy-four eyes in all—focused at once.

"Our royal house has also passed through much terrible history. We have endured fierce wars between nations. But hear me. Without learning from the lessons of the past, one cannot hope for a peaceful future. It is you who will understand the truths of history and put them to use in the future. Each and every thing you learn each day builds your foundation. When it is time to study, study with all your might. When it is time to play, play with all your might. Without exception, every one of you has exactly that ability."

"Dear."

Funaho quietly raised her face.

"Mm, yes…"

The Juraian Emperor came back to himself and gave the teacher a solemn bow.

"I have been repeatedly rude. I too must refrain from whispering. Please resume the lesson."

"Then—let's all think about what the main character must have been feeling."

The teacher took up her textbook in a daze, but then—as if driven by some irresistible feeling—put it down again.

"Just now, Masaki-san's father gave us some very wonderful words. The story all of you are studying actually happened. It is absolutely not fiction or imagination. As Father said—each thing you feel right now becomes the foundation that builds our future. I will do my best to teach. So please, all of you—do your best to study."

Funaho and Misaki exchanged glances and smiled at each other.

What a fine teacher, said Funaho's eyes.

She can probably teach more than those at the royal Academy, Misaki smiled back.

The Jurai Emperor stood feeling inwardly sheepish, but his gaze kept being drawn irresistibly to Sasami's back.

Good girl, that's my girl… he was inwardly dissolving with pride.

Earth elementary schools aren't so bad at all.

And then across the corridor he caught sight of Katsuhito, grinning and flashing a peace sign.

"You…"

That fool of a son, making fools of us—I'm keeping the Nayuta!

Even the Juraian Emperor's pride was no match for his son the strategist.

"Washu-san…"

Tenchi stared at the monitor speechless and turned.

"Yosho-dono put one over on us."

Washu laughed in amusement, stood up leaving the monitor on, and rose.

"Ryoko didn't have a chance to show up. Well, let's go to meet them. I'll leave the spy-eye stationed there."

That night, the Masaki house was lively around the rare secret sake Nayuta and the bounty of autumn.

"Father! Mother! Thank you so much for coming today! Sasami was so so happy!"

"Good, good—keep studying hard."

Asuza looked down at Sasami with an expression of absolute happiness as she crawled into her father's lap.

"Elder Brother! I thought my heart would stop!"

"They say drinking Nayuta extends your life by a thousand years."

Katsuhito told Ayeka with an innocent face.

"For a beloved little sister—isn't it worth it?"

"This really is excellent sake."

Ryoko looked at Tenchi with a blissful expression and smiled.

"The observation day was interesting. Next it'll be the athletic meet."

"Fine, fine, I surrender. If we're going to do it, let's all go together with a bang."

Tenchi finally gave in and laughed.

"In that case, I'll do my best with the cooking again."

George caught Tenchi's eye and held out an empty cup, requesting a modest reward in return.

SUBJ… The Other Day…

Your Majesty and Misaki-Okaasama and Funaho-Okaasama—we are most deeply grateful that you traveled so far to be with us, and I offer you our sincerest thanks.
I trust you were relieved to see Sasami in good health.
Since then, the class has been apparently quite animated with talk of "Masaki's important-looking father and beautiful mothers (and the beautiful aunt)."
Sasami says "explaining things without giving us away was incredibly hard," but please don't worry.
I have shared wisdom on how to explain things in a manner consistent with the realities of an Earth elementary school.
So as a result, Father and the Mothers are engaged in "diplomatic and negotiation work on behalf of the Japanese government" and are "always overseas," so Sasami and her sister are "being looked after at the home of the relative Katsuhito-ojisama."
Please, on your next visit—by all means do not let slip "in our country" or anything of the sort.
When the three of you come together, you inevitably draw attention, so next time if possible I humbly suggest you might take turns coming, so that Sasami's explanatory burden will be somewhat lighter.

Now then…Father's treasured Nayuta was most delicious.
Long ago, when I received it as a toast of good fortune for my first battle, I secretly resolved: "Live and return, to taste it once more as the sake of victory." I unexpectedly recalled that memory, and my tear ducts nearly loosened.
I am most deeply grateful to Father for keeping that promise and sharing it so generously.

I am genuinely glad that not only those of the Juraian royal family, but Ryoko and Washu-dono as well raised cups together.
May this bond become an eternal tie.

Now—when you next come here, I shall treat you to a sake I, Yosho, have selected with great care.
It cannot compare to Nayuta, but Earth's sake is also quite satisfying.

Wishing Father and the Mothers' good health,

Yosho

A Tenchi Day

The Masaki household's famous ultra-genius scientist Washu's lab was pursuing mysterious research as usual today.

Washu's lab is located beyond the house's storage room, accessed through subspace.

Though to Tenchi, who was not science-minded, this didn't quite make sense.

"Let sleeping dogs lie."

"Curiosity killed the cat."

As the old sayings go, Tenchi generally took the route of avoiding the lab.

Needless to say, it was because he feared the consequences.

One day, as Tenchi passed through the corridor on the way back to his room, Washu's door opened and Washu's face appeared.

"Tenchi-dono, one moment."

"What is it?"

Seeing something large and operational behind the door, Tenchi drew back slightly.

There had once been a time he'd nearly been bound to a strange device and used as an experiment subject.

"I won't do anything. I just want to ask you something."

"W-what?"

Tenchi was already retreating.

"Tenchi-dono—is there anything you want?"

"There isn't."

Immediate answer.

"…Well, I mean, there's nothing I need right now. If anything, I think I might like a motorbike, but not the kind that flies through the air."

"You're putting up a defensive wall."

Washu frowned.

"Your birthday is coming up soon, isn't it? I thought I'd at least ask about your preferences—but that face says you don't want anything."

"Well, um…"

Washu looked disappointed, so Tenchi hedged.

"It's just that somehow I feel heavy about it… Ayeka-san asked me yesterday too. This morning Ryoko said the same thing. But I think—whether it's handmade cookies or a muffler, somehow I feel like that doesn't quite feel right. Not that I don't want things—presents are always nice to receive. But I hate the idea of it causing fights. If that's how it's going to be, I'd rather just have nothing—that would be easier."

"Hmm… I see."

Washu folded her arms and looked up at the ceiling.

"I can't say I don't understand that feeling. Yes… I see. All right."

Washu smiled and nodded.

"Thank you. That's all."

Washu waved cheerfully and disappeared back into the lab.

Tenchi stared at the storage room door for a moment, then shook his head and went up the stairs.

Washu giving in so easily didn't quite sit right—but then again, asking about it seemed scary too.

The day before his birthday passed very peacefully indeed.

Ayeka stayed shut in her room and didn't come out. Sasami and George had a cookbook spread out in the kitchen, apparently consulting about something.

Ryoko was nowhere to be seen all day.

Tenchi gave thanks to the peaceful stars above, and wishing for a peaceful morning tomorrow—knowing it was probably impossible—went to sleep.

The next morning, when he woke up, the sky was perfectly clear and the sun's light illuminated the world below with generous warmth.

He went down the stairs and into the living room, and there were Ryoko and Ayeka sitting together on the sofa watching TV.

"Good morning, Tenchi."

"Good morning, Tenchi-sama."

"G-good morning."

Tenchi answered with somewhat of a start.

Ryoko and Ayeka looked at each other, exchanged a giggle, and nudged each other with their elbows.

"You two are getting along well."

"Tell Sis to say it first."

"You say it first."

The two were nudging each other and glancing at Tenchi, cheeks pink.

"Hurry up and say it. If you don't, I'll say it."

"Ugh, Ayeka, you're so mean ♡"

As Tenchi watched wide-eyed at the two of them, Ryoko suddenly stood up.

"Um… listen…"

And then Ryoko turned bright red and looked at Ayeka for help.

"You're really hopeless, aren't you, Ryoko-san. Here—I'll say it along with you."

The two exchanged glances, reached out and held hands.

"Happy birthday, Tenchi(-sama)!"

Tenchi's knees nearly gave out.

"Now then, Tenchi-sama. Please make sure to be home by noon. Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san are coming too, and we thought we'd have a small party. So no peeking until then ♡"

Ayeka sent Tenchi out and closed the living room door.

Banished to the corridor, Tenchi stood blankly.

"What on earth happened…?!"

Was this a sign of some great change? Or was he simply being pranked?

How, in a single night, had Ryoko and Ayeka become like best friends from high school?

He should have realized it here, but the shock had half-crashed his brain, and he only murmured this:

"Come to think of it… what about breakfast? What happened to breakfast?"

Tenchi walked out the door in a daze, his blood pressure still low.

"Right, let's skip ahead here."

In the lab, Washu had a large device running, following Tenchi's reactions in real time, and pressed the skip button.

Morning passed somehow without much happening, and with five minutes until noon, Tenchi came hurrying back.

"A party… it must be my birthday party."

When he entered through the front door, two pairs of women's shoes had been added. On the glass sliding door to the living room, the shadows of women bustling back and forth were visible, and giggles and chatter leaked through.

"Hurry, hurry! Tenchi-sama is already on his way back!"

"Hey, is the cake okay here?"

"Ryoko-san, your ribbon has come undone!"

Tenchi stood with his hand on the handle, feeling like the inside of that door had become a different dimension.

Without him having opened it, the door swung open naturally, and a "Happy Birthday" chorus like a blessing raining down from heaven began.

The chorus was in three parts—soprano, mezzo-soprano, and alto—and must have taken considerable practice.

"Happy birthday, Tenchi-sama!"

"Happy birthday, Tenchi!"

Ayeka, Ryoko, Sasami, Mihoshi, and Kiyone surrounded Tenchi, each calling out congratulations.

All of them were in white dresses with different colored ribbons—quite different from their usual clothes.

The living room overflowed with flowers, and artificial stars, glittering tinsel, paper strips, and pretty cards were hung as decorations—as lively as if Christmas, Tanabata, and New Year's had all arrived together.

"Tenchi-nii-chan, you must be hungry."

An even greater wonder awaited on the table in the Japanese room.

Extravagant dishes packed so full it looked like a wedding, and in the center stood a three-tiered cake topped with as many candles as his years.

"Amazing…"

"Sasami and George-san made it all."

Sasami said proudly, pulling Tenchi's hand and seating him in front of the cake.

"Eat lots!"

Under the intense gaze of so many eager eyes, Tenchi swallowed celestial delicacies with fine wine until the nervous tension made his stomach uneasy.

"Um… why…"

Ayeka cut him off.

"I am the happiest person in the world today! To celebrate with Tenchi-sama whom I love so dearly and with my friends—isn't that right, Ryoko-san?"

"Yeah. I think about it sometimes. What a lucky thing it was to meet Tenchi and everyone on this planet."

"The food is delicious, Tenchi-san is wonderful, and Kiyone is so kind—I'm so glad I fell onto this planet!"

"Mihoshi is so cute, isn't she?"

Kiyone added.

"We get along too well sometimes and end up fighting. We're true best friends!"

"The same goes for me and Ryoko. It's a bit sudden, but I think there is nothing more precious in this world than love and peace."

Out of nowhere "Imagine" by John Lennon began to play, and Tenchi's heart nearly leaped out of his chest.

"A toast to love and peace!"

Ryoko declared, and back came the chorus: "The most important thing in the world—that's friendship!"

The music changed to "We Are the World," then "Love and Peace Together," "Without You," and for some reason reached its peak with "Love Is All Music."

Throughout, Ayeka and Ryoko were beaming with flushed faces, smiling and nodding at each other like angels of love.

"W-wait a moment!!"

Tenchi finally started to grasp what was happening.

Something was obviously wrong.

This Happy and Peace and Love-Love atmosphere was clearly being manufactured by someone.

Without that, given Ayeka's and Ryoko's natural personalities, there was no way things could become this bizarrely harmonious.

And that someone was a certain person who had not appeared in this scene at all, and was the source of this entire anomaly.

"Washu-san! You're there, aren't you?"

Tenchi shouted into the air.

"Stop this kind of joke! I know it's my birthday, but this is too much. I did say I hate fighting, but I didn't say become abnormally close! Stop it now!"

"Why? I wanted to give you a wonderful day full of love, peace, and goodwill."

He thought he heard Washu's voice—and then he woke up in his bed.

Still the middle of the night.

"A dream…"

Tenchi sighed and waited for his pounding heart to calm down.

"That was such a strange dream… even Washu-san wouldn't actually do something like that."

Tenchi sighed once more, closed his eyes.

"Good thing I tested it."

Washu murmured, watching the lab monitor.

"Then I'll fine-tune some of this system here and it'll be perfect."

Just then the lab door opened and Ryoko's face appeared.

Behind her, in her nightclothes, Ayeka was visible too.

"Hey, Washu. I need to ask you something—about Tenchi's birthday tomorrow…"

The next morning when he woke up, the sky was perfectly clear and the sun's light illuminated the world below with generous warmth.

"Yesterday I must have had some strange dream."

Tenchi muttered as he went downstairs and into the living room—and there were Ryoko and Ayeka sitting together on the sofa watching TV.

"Good morning, Tenchi."

"Good morning, Tenchi-sama."

"G-good morning."

Tenchi answered, somewhat startled.

Ryoko and Ayeka looked at each other, giggled softly, and nudged each other with their elbows.

"You say it first."

"No, you say it first."

Nudging each other and sneaking glances at Tenchi, blushing.

"Hurry up. If you won't, I'll say it."

"Ugh, you're so mean, Ayeka ♡"

As Tenchi watched wide-eyed, Ryoko suddenly stood up.

"Um… about that…"

Ryoko turned bright red and looked to Ayeka for help.

"You're really hopeless, aren't you, Ryoko-san. Come on—I'll say it with you."

The two exchanged glances and held hands.

"Happy birthday, Tenchi(-sama)!"

Tenchi nearly buckled.

"And Tenchi-sama—please do come home by noon. Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san are coming too, and we're going to have a small party. No peeking until then ♡"

Ayeka sent Tenchi out the door and closed the living room door.

Banished to the hallway, Tenchi stood blankly.

"What on earth happened…?!"

In one night Ryoko and Ayeka had turned into best friends—what kind of divine absurdity was this?

He should have realized here, but far too stunned, half his brain had crashed, and he only murmured:

"Come to think of it… breakfast… what happened to breakfast?"

Tenchi, still pale, drifted outside.

"Good, skip the usual part."

In the lab, Washu was watching Tenchi's reactions in real time and pressed the skip button.

Morning somehow passed with very little happening, and with five minutes until noon, Tenchi came hurrying back.

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When he entered through the front door, two pairs of women's shoes had been added. On the glass sliding door of the living room, shadows of busy women could be seen, and giggles and conversation leaked through.

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"Amazing…"

"Sasami and George-san made it all."

Sasami said proudly, pulling Tenchi's hand and seating him in front of the cake.

"Eat lots!"

He was swallowing heavenly food and fine wine under the intense gaze of many earnest eyes, when the nervousness started to upset his stomach.

"Um… how…"

Ayeka cut him off.

"I am the happiest person in the world today! Celebrating with dear Tenchi-sama and my friends—isn't that right, Ryoko-san?"

"Yeah. And I keep thinking—I was so lucky to meet Tenchi and everyone on this planet."

"The food is delicious and Tenchi-san is wonderful and Kiyone is so kind—I'm glad I fell onto this planet!"

"Mihoshi is so cute, right?"

Kiyone added.

"We get along so well we sometimes have arguments. We're true best friends!"

"It's the same for me and Ryoko. It's a bit sudden of me to say—but I believe there is nothing more precious in this world than love and peace."

"Imagine" started to play out of nowhere and Tenchi's heart nearly leaped from his chest.

"To love and peace!"

Ryoko declared, and the chorus responded: "The most important thing in the world—that's friendship!"

The music shifted to "We Are the World," then "Love and Peace Together," "Without You," and for some reason peaked with "Love Is All Music."

Throughout all this, Ayeka and Ryoko beamed with flushed faces and glittering eyes, smiling and nodding at each other like angels of love.

"W-wait a moment!!"

At last Tenchi began to grasp the situation.

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Without that, given Ayeka and Ryoko's natural personalities, there was no way they'd become this bizarrely harmonious.

And that someone was a certain person who hadn't shown her face in this scene at all—the source of this entire anomaly.

"Washu-san! I know you're there!"

Tenchi shouted into the air.

"Stop this kind of joke! I know it's my birthday, but this is too much. I did say I hate fighting—but I never said become abnormally close! Please, stop it!"

"Why? I wanted to give you a wonderful day full of love, peace, and goodwill."

Washu's voice could be heard.

"It's enough, now—seriously, Washu-san! You showed me this strange dream last night too, didn't you? Why go to all this trouble? No more dreams please—just give me a normal morning!"

"Tenchi-dono, that is a misunderstanding."

And from behind Washu, Sasami's head popped out.

"What's wrong, Tenchi-nii-chan? Breakfast is almost ready. Today we're going shopping in Uncle's car, so help out, Tenchi-nii-chan."

"Father's car?"

Tenchi regained some composure.

Tenchi's dream yesterday hadn't included any talk of Father, so this must be the real morning, not a dream.

"Oh, Tenchi. When breakfast is done let's head out. Sasami-chan and George-san are making a special dinner tonight. And it sounds like Kiyone-san and the others are cutting their shift short to come over—exciting!"

Nobuyuki emerged from the bathroom, grinning and slapping Tenchi on the back.

"A birthday surrounded by beautiful women. You really are a lucky man."

Tenchi swallowed his ochazuke with lingering doubt, and as he was putting on his shoes at the entrance, Ayeka and Ryoko came together to see him off.

"Tenchi-sama, have a good day."

"You'll be fine, don't worry."

"Tenchi-dono, are you still suspicious?"

Washu smiled and jerked her chin at the two of them.

"If you're that worried, shall Washu-chan pinch your cheeks?"

"No thank you."

Tenchi walked out through the entrance with a disgruntled expression.

Even when he returned from shopping, Ryoko and Ayeka were still on good terms.

"Please go do some practice or something, Tenchi-sama"—turned out of the house like that, Tenchi went to Grandpa's and was put to work weeding until evening, returning thoroughly exhausted.

At the front door, two pairs of women's shoes had been added.

"This feels like the same development again somehow…"

"What are you muttering about?"

Katsuhito briskly removed his sandals and threw open the living room door energetically.

"Happy birthday to you…"

The angelic chorus broke off midway, and the women looked at each other in bewilderment.

"Oh, how very kind of you—"

Katsuhito gave a weighty bow, then simply walked off in the direction of the Japanese room.

"I told you it wasn't him!"

"You didn't say anything! You were the one elbowing me, so I thought for sure it was…"

The moment they noticed Tenchi standing open-mouthed in the doorway, Ryoko and Ayeka broke into broad grins.

"You've worked hard, Tenchi-sama. Come now, wash your hands and come in."

"We weren't fighting, just so you know."

Tenchi sat down at the table with an increasingly strange feeling.

"Gosh, Sasami-chan is a genius at cooking."

"She is my little sister, naturally."

Ryoko made a briefly disgruntled face, then hurried to produce a smile.

"Yeah. Well… I suppose that might be so."

"Indeed. No matter how you put it, I am someone who…"

"Sis!"

Sasami frowned, so Ayeka came back to herself.

"…Having a strong person around is helpful in various ways."

Ayeka laughed "hohoho," and a peculiar atmosphere settled over the table.

"This must be quite a strain. Have you been doing this since morning?"

"Mihoshi, don't say unnecessary things!"

"Hmm?"

Tenchi had stopped his chopsticks and turned, so Kiyone hurriedly produced a professional smile.

"How wonderful to have been invited to such a delightful party today…"

"Kyo-chan, that makes it even weirder."

"You—!"

The moment Kiyone's eyes went sharp, Washu, who had been silently eating the feast, raised one finger.

"…Shall I get you some fried chicken?"

"Cough cough cough."

Sasami, who had been watching the two of them, choked on her juice and had to have George rub and pat her back for a while.

"Phew, that was hard. Washu-chan, this really is impossible."

"???"

Tenchi sensed that the women had some secret among them, but it was a little frightening to ask.

"Tenchi-sama, do eat more."

The moment Ayeka reached out to silence her sister, a bottle of juice tipped over and made a puddle on Ryoko's striped dress.

"Why you—did you do that on purpose!"

Ryoko reflexively stood up and grabbed Ayeka's collar.

"I did not, you horrid woman!!"

"Stop it—Sis and Ryoko-san, if you fight there's a fine…"

"A fine?!"

"It's nothing, Tenchi-san."

Sasami desperately tried to stop the scuffling sisters, while Kiyone instinctively clamped her hand over Mihoshi's mouth with a strained face.

"Kiyone, I haven't said anything yet!"

"No! If I let go of your hand, you'll tell everything from top to bottom!"

"Yellow card! You, you, and you!"

Finally Washu stood up and pointed at Ryoko, Ayeka, and Kiyone in turn.

"After all the trouble I went to, and you of all people—! Who was it that came to me wanting to give a memorable birthday present? If this was going to happen, my virtual reality system would have done it perfectly—but you all said you wanted to do it yourselves…"

Washu gave up and shrugged.

"I'm sorry, Tenchi-dono. Today I wanted to give you the day you wished for, but thanks to these terrible actors it's all ruined. Sasami-chan even worked so hard cooking."

"It was actually Ryoko-nee-chan who brought up the no-fighting fine."

Sasami finally revealed the secret.

"She said let's absolutely not fight even once today. Even the smallest little argument—forbidden. Washu-chan said Tenchi-nii-chan would be happiest with that, so everyone decided to go along with it."

"So that's what it was…"

The moment the mystery was finally solved, all the tension drained away.

"I thought there must be some terrible secret going on…"

Tenchi took a towel and pressed it into Ryoko's hands.

"Come on, fight later—wipe it up first."

Seeing Ayeka and Ryoko look at each other, Tenchi gave a wry smile.

"You really didn't have to force yourselves like that. But just the thought of it makes me happy. Sasami-chan, thank you for the delicious cooking. That must have been a lot of work, right? Mihoshi-san and Kiyone-san—thank you for coming when you're so busy."

He turned lastly to Washu, and the petite genius scientist had her face turned away and was drinking wine.

"Washu-san—I'm sorry for doubting you. This really has been a wonderful birthday."

"There's nothing worth thanking me for."

Washu waved her hand uncomfortably.

"Sasami-chan, let's move on to the cake."

"Yes!"

Sasami lit the candles.

"Tenchi-nii-chan—go ahead!"

Tenchi blew out the candles.

"Happy birthday!"

"Congratulations!"

Cheers erupted and applause broke out, and finally the birthday atmosphere returned.

"Well, I'll let you off today, Ayeka." "Hmph. You went and stained yourself—go change and put the dirty things in water."

Those two were back to their usual rhythm as well.

As Tenchi smiled, Sasami peered in right away.

"Oh! Tenchi-nii-chan is smiling!"

"Yeah…"

Tenchi glanced briefly at Washu's face.

"Sasami-chan, go ask Washu-chan how many tens of thousands of years old she's become."

"I am eternally thirteen!"

She had her face turned away, but she was listening perfectly well.

"Oh, everyone's going!"

Nobuyuki returned and peeked into the living room.

"It's just getting started."

Katsuhito raised his cup.

"Looks fun, Tenchi?"

"Yes. Couldn't be better."

And then, for the first time, Washu smiled.

"A present-day home drama over an unreachable dream. You really are that kind of person, aren't you. And here the genius Washu-chan went and made you a whole virtual reality system."

"That's not quite it. My dream is, you see…"

Tenchi leaned over and whispered something in Washu's ear.

"Oh… oh my, is that so?"

Washu smirked.

"What? What are you talking about?"

Ayeka and the others spotted it immediately and crowded in.

"Tenchi-dono says his dream is to eat with three hundred and sixty-five beautiful women, rotating them daily, and have a different woman tell him stories every night."

"Washu-san?!"

Tenchi was astounded.

"What are you saying?! I just said, without some kind of system, if everyone could get along and live together happily…"

"Joking, joking."

Washu answered with a cool expression.

"I just wanted people to use my system for something like that too. Anyway—the genius Washu-chan's lab is waiting for you anytime, Tenchi-dono."

"I'd like to use it!"

Ryoko immediately raised her hand.

"A virtual night with Tenchi, all lovey-dovey."

"I am first!"

Ayeka cut in boldly.

"A two-shot with Tenchi-sama in a flower field…"

"Sasami would rather have an amusement park!"

"Wouldn't it have to be an okonomiyaki restaurant?"

"Excuse me, today's theme isn't quite…"

Sasami, Mihoshi, and Kiyone joined in, and the birthday ceasefire agreement vanished at lightning speed into another dimension.

"There they go."

Washu sighed pointedly.

"Well, if Tenchi-dono says this is fine, then I suppose there's nothing to be done."

"This is fine."

Tenchi showed a relieved smile.

"This is fine. Normal is best."

"You really are hopeless, you know."

Washu smiled back and poured wine into Tenchi's glass.

Afterword

To everyone who always supports Tenchi—thank you.
After many twists and turns, the novels I've been writing have now passed ten volumes.
The eleventh is again a collection of short stories.

If the previous short story collection was about the four seasons of the Masaki household, this time I suppose it is more of a seasonal almanac for each member.
It is entirely thanks to your support that I have been able to keep writing like this, and I am grateful.
In the previous afterword I wrote that short stories are difficult, and that feeling hasn't changed.
For an author who doesn't have the kind of first-rate mind from which ideas spring like a fountain, each and every month is a continuous trial.
I try to put my own care and imagination into each piece so that you can enjoy them…
Even so, I find myself thinking anew—"Tenchi" really does suit a Japanese aesthetic.
The original work has a Japanese flavor to it, so perhaps it goes without saying, but I feel the cherry blossoms and autumn leaves suit it particularly well. Perhaps that's because the Masaki household inhabitants live surrounded by peaceful nature.
When I browse through a seasonal almanac looking for titles and material, I find myself thinking—surely Katsuhito and Nobuyuki must be picking up the same book on autumn evenings.
The background music would be the sound of insects, and the rustling of Funaho's leaves in the breeze, perhaps.

Now, in this season of reading by lamplight, the author finds it difficult to get much sustained reading in—but what might Tenchi be reading?
Being a boy, I imagine he might like detective novels, but perhaps he enjoys historical stories too. Given his father's profession, he might occasionally pick up architecture magazines.
He doesn't say it loudly, but he might actually know quite a lot about Buddhist statues and shrines and temples.
Though first of all, I wonder how he finds time to read, surrounded as he is by girls.
As for Nobuyuki, girls' manga were his reading material, but he probably skims through anything currently popular—and then Katsuhito wanders in and borrows things like "The Lost Paradise"…
That could easily happen.
And what about Ayeka, Ryoko, and the other girls?
Setting Washu aside, I can't quite picture any of them with a book in hand—but just like all of you, maybe they each have a favorite book that they read in their private time.
Yes—even the girls who always seem to be in the thick of the commotion together must have their own time to reflect on themselves, to lose themselves in thought alone.
And each may be holding an untold story close to her heart…
I'm thinking it might be nice to take a slightly different perspective and focus on each person's individual story.

Now—I'm late in mentioning it—but did everyone enjoy the film "Midsummer's eve" released this summer?
Thanks to doing the theatrical version, I was invited to various events related to the film.
To everyone who came to events and signings—thank you so much.

I genuinely wished I had more time to talk with each of you individually—to come down from the stage and hear what everyone had to say.
The author is not particularly good at talking in front of people (it might be more accurate to say I'm flat-out bad at it), but I want to work hard on the novels to live up to the support you've given me.
I've also added a newly written bonus piece to this book.
I hope you'll enjoy the somewhat complicated expression on Tenchi-kun's face.

From the author's office, scattered by a cat
-Naoko Hasegawa

THE END!